

Interreligious Dialogue: What Is Required of Us?

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Pilate's question, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" demands an answer as urgently today as two thousand years ago. By travel and the ubiquitous beams of communications satellites the world has shrunk to a neighborhood, and the devotees of the great religions of the world no longer live in isolation. Increasingly they practice their respective faith traditions in close proximity to each other.

Not only the interweaving of the world's religions within the fabric of the global community but the rise of militant fundamentalisms, fueling ethnic conflict and spawning terrorism, make it imperative that interreligious dialogue take place for the sake of the peace of the world. Political leaders and parties will always attempt to Co-opt the respective religious traditions for their own purposes, but at least the religions in their authentic expression need not condone such misuse, and, with genuine dialogue, a deeper understanding of other faith traditions would be a force for the creation of a more secure world—and a movement toward a reign of peace, surely the intention of the Creator God.

For the Christian religion, interreligious dialogue calls for a serious engagement with Pilate's question. Until we come to a new appraisal of the place of Jesus in the purpose of God and the revelation of that purpose, we will not be able to enter into real dialogue. Beginning with the absoluteness of Christianity based on the finality of God's revelation in Jesus and a salvation constituted exclusively through his atoning death, we may enter discussion and evidence a civil tolerance but without the openness to new insight that alone makes for serious and honest dialogue. Tolerance may be present in people who are convinced that they possess the final truth but are unwilling to impose it on another. But such an attitude also precludes that such people will learn something from the other since they begin with the assumption that theirs is the exclusive truth.

Whatever revisioning interreligious dialogue may demand from other faith traditions, for the Christian tradition, a rethinking of its core creedal Christological formulations and their salvific implications is of first importance.

The Quest of the Historical Jesus

As I look across my desk at the shelf of books, the name of Jesus is prominent. Book after book published in the last few years seeks to uncover the mystery and meaning of this one who “comes to us as One unknown...,” to use Schweitzer’s familiar designation. Studies emanate from the Jesus Seminar people, as well as many beyond their ranks, such as the Catholic scholar Raymond Brown and the highly respected Jewish scholar E. P. Sanders. My eye catches the title of an older bundle of essays by Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus: Inspiring and Disturbing Presence*. Indeed.

I move to the shelf and pull down the classic study by Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. In his preface to the English translation, F. C. Burkitt refers to the sharp controversy that had been raging on the continent in the late nineteenth century over the attempt to discover the historical Jesus behind the Christ figure that appears in the writings, particularly of Paul. Such sharp battle, he notes, is somewhat foreign to the more genteel English, but even those whose lives of Jesus were “written with hate” have performed a great service in bringing to light an understanding “of the greatest historical problem in the history of our race.” The new understanding, Burkitt claims, makes clear

that the object of attack was not the historical Jesus after all, but a temporary idea of Him, inadequate because it did not truly represent him or the world in which he lived, (vi)

Schweitzer’s work brought the first quest to an end by pointing out the eschatological center of Jesus’ message in contrast to the portrait that portrayed Jesus as the ideal person of nineteenth-century, European society. With the rise of historical thinking, it was being recognized that historical research must seek to uncover the context of the first and second centuries if it would discover Jesus of Nazareth.

Burkitt was confident that such an understanding would be taken for granted in the ongoing research into Christian origins. He cites a contemporary, Father Tyrrell, who claimed that Christianity was at a crossroads, but Burkitt little doubts that the church would come to terms with the results of historical research and bring the significance of Jesus Christ to fresh expression. That the eschatological prophet of Schweitzer’s description would need to be translated into another image if he were to be meaningfully appropriated in the twentieth century went without saying. The dawning historical consciousness was leading to the recognition, in Burkitt’s words,

that absolute truth cannot be embodied in human thought and that its expression must always be clothed in symbols. It may be that we have to translate the hopes and fears of our spiritual ancestors into the language of our new world. (vii)

That the Absolute can be expressed only in symbol, in metaphor, has been widely recognized through linguistic studies in the last half of the present century. Metaphor in its common understanding is a figure of speech in which there is a transfer of meaning—one term is illuminated by attaching to it some of the associations of another, so that metaphor is “that trope, or figure of speech, in which we speak of one thing in terms suggestive of another” (Soskice, 1985, 54). In this sense, all religious language and speech about God is metaphoric. That does not take away from the truthfulness of what is communicated; indeed, picture language often conveys a truth far better than a formula or abstract definition. It does, however, mean that the truth being conveyed and the linguistic form, the particular figure of speech, are not necessarily tied to each other. The same truth may be able to be conveyed by a different figure of speech, and in another culture or time a figure of speech that communicates the truth at issue may fail to bring that truth to expression with clarity.

In other words, the symbols used to express the truth of the Absolute must not themselves be absolutized. The symbolic form of expression points beyond itself; one must “see through” the symbol to the reality symbolized. The form of expression, the specific figure of speech chosen to disclose the reality may be adequate or inadequate; it may disclose or it may mislead. Only those metaphoric forms that prove themselves in usage will last. But even those that prove valuable over the ages and generations must not be understood as identical with the truth or reality signified. There may arise in evolving cultural experience reason to cease using a metaphor or to modify its use if it becomes evident that it has conveyed not only aspects of truth but also misunderstanding that has proven detrimental – for example, the metaphor of God as Father in current feminist critique of patriarchy.

When a metaphor for the Absolute is challenged, it must be recognized that it is not the Absolute that is challenged, but only the symbolic form used to disclose the truth of the Absolute.

The Rise of Historical Thinking

As he wrote the preface to Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in 1910, Burkitt pointed to the growing recognition of the symbolic character of religious language in the wake of the rise of historical thinking in the nineteenth century.

It was in that cultural context that the first quest of the historical Jesus took place, which Schweitzer showed to be naive. Further historical-critical research revealed the inadequacy of the historical methods employed and of the understanding of the nature of the biblical documents examined. Nevertheless,

thinking historically is the mark of modernity and remains so in post-modernism which, in general, denies the possibility of formulating principles or doctrines identical with foundational reality, along with rejecting the Enlightenment claim that there are universal truths of reason.

We can see the implications of this new way of thinking—thinking with historical consciousness—if we examine the work of Ernst Troeltsch. He is best identified as an exponent of historicism, a term used here to define the interpretation of the totality of cultural development (including the Christian tradition) as phenomena of the historical process. Troeltsch recognized that the advent of the historical-critical method signified more than just a new means by which to gain knowledge of the past. Far more, it symbolized a revolution in the consciousness of the person of the West. He was convinced that the employment of this method was incompatible with the traditional Christian faith based on a supernaturalistic metaphysics. This clash was most evident, as we have noted above, in the area of biblical criticism.

Troeltsch did not point to particular results of scholarly research that was troubling to believers; rather, he pointed to the method that yielded the disturbing data. The assumptions of the method, he claimed, were irreconcilable with the traditional dogmatic method. Traditional dogmatic formulation regarded the Scriptures as supernaturally inspired; the historian assumed they must be understood in terms of the historical context in which they arose, subject to the same principles of interpretation and criticism applied to any ancient literature. The historian, following this method, according to Troeltsch, could not assume events recorded in Scripture were supernatural interventions by God; rather, the historian must treat them in the causal nexus of their times. And rather than granting uniqueness to the central redemptive events to which the Bible pointed, the historian must treat them as analogous to all other historical events past and present. Further, the historian's research can yield only probable results, an inadequate ground for faith.

Troeltsch's ability to recognize the revolutionary nature of the employment of the historical-critical method revealed to him what remained hidden for many theological thinkers, namely, that one has to make a choice to accept the method and its consequences or to reject the method as inappropriate. What could not be done was to use the method as long as the consequences were compatible with one's theological presuppositions and reject it when they went counter to one's prior belief.

The church must choose, Troeltsch was certain, to employ the method *and* accept the consequences, letting burn what must burn and then building again a truer, if more humble, foundation. It was his conviction that historical thinking had penetrated the mind of the Western person so deeply that it was no longer possible to think in any other vein. Either the Christian tradition would

accommodate itself to the spirit of the times or it would become a relic of the past.

In his discussion of the significance of the historicity of Jesus for Christian faith, Troeltsch included Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Herrmann in his criticism, for while the liberal Protestant tradition recognized the validity of the historical-critical method for the investigation of Christian origins, it failed to recognize the relativity of all historical phenomena including Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently Troeltsch could but condemn their view that Jesus is the absolute Savior for all people of all times and places (cf. *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben* p. 51).

In Troeltsch's view the very historical-critical approach to Christian origins, especially to Jesus himself, undercut any attempt to salvage from the uniformity of history a final and absolute revelation of God. Thus Troeltsch was convinced that the theology of the future would have to purge away the last vestiges of the old dogmatic approach and carry through more rigorously the requirements of the historical-critical method that draws all historical phenomena, Jesus of Nazareth not excepted, into the movement of historical process, allowing for no absolute uniqueness in the midst of the relative.

Paradoxical as it may appear, Karl Barth quite agreed with Troeltsch—agreed, that is, that to subject Jesus to historical-critical research behind the witness of the New Testament is to level him down to one historical person among others, in whom there cannot possibly be found the final and definitive revelation of God. Of course, agreement with Troeltsch that having followed the path it did, there was no stopping halfway, does not imply that Barth advocates with Troeltsch that their successors should draw the logical conclusion as Troeltsch advocated. On the contrary, Barth discovers their fatal error in the course they chose to follow in the first place. It was not their decision to grant recognition to the use of the historical-critical method and then fail to draw the conclusions to which it led. Rather, it was their understanding of religion as an innate potential of the human spirit and their failure to see that, defined in such terms, the Christian faith was not being spoken of at all. If Christianity were a phenomenon of the religious capacity of the human person, then it would be one religion among others and could be understood only, as Troeltsch maintained, by a comparative historical study. In such an instance there could be no talk of an absolute and definitive revelatory significance or meaning in history. If one started where Troeltsch started, Barth maintained, one would end where Troeltsch ended. But then, according to Barth, we have to do not with the religion of revelation but with the revelation of religion (*Church Dogmatics* I, 2, 284), and the application of the historical-critical method will discover in Jesus no more than a man among other men and in Christianity no more than a religion among other religions. The

History of Religions school is only the logical outcome of a theology that speaks of the believing person rather than of the revealing God. Theology that takes itself

seriously can speak only from the revelation of God that has grasped it, paying homage to no worldview, be it ancient or modern, to no philosophical system, and to no anthropological analysis of the human religious capacity. Theology must speak from out of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Thus Barth completely repudiated the method of Troeltsch, and, to the dismay of the academic world, pursued the traditional dogmatic method, reducing historical-critical research to a secondary, helping role in the explication of the biblical witness to Jesus Christ.

Barth's repudiation of Troeltsch and the whole project of nineteenth-century liberalism prevailed. A whole generation of theologians was shaped by the theology of the Word that, while not a uniform movement, was at one in removing the truth of Christian faith from the results of historical investigation.

But as the twentieth century nears its end, Troeltsch is being studied anew. Garrett E. Paul in a 1993 *Christian Century* article asks and answers in his title, "Why Troeltsch? Why Today? Theology for the 21st Century." Dietrich Bonhoeffer had exposed the Achilles' heel of Barth's dogmatic method with his recognition of Barth's "positivism of revelation." Writing from prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer pointed out that Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion but that he replaced it with a positivist doctrine of revelation that says in effect, "Take it or leave it." In a later letter he affirmed Barth's ethical observations as well as his dogmatic views, but went on to write:

it was that he gave no concrete guidance, either in dogmatics or in ethics, on the non-religious interpretation of theological concepts. There lies his limitation, and because of it his theology of revelation becomes positivist, a "positivism of revelation," as I put it.

Bultmann, who joined Barth in the removal of Christian origins from historical investigation, claiming the necessity only of the "dass" of the historical Jesus for faith, also saw his disciples move away from this view as they engaged in "the new quest of the historical Jesus."

Presently the flood of studies being published, including the work of the Jesus Seminar scholars, indicates that the implications of historical thinking recognized and applied by Troeltsch will not go away. Karl Barth, arguably the greatest theological thinker of the century and among the greats of all time, was able by the power of his thought and the circumstances of his historical moment to stem the tide of historical thinking applied to theological formulation for a generation, but the kerygma sheltered in a safe haven denying investigation of historical foundations cannot finally be maintained no matter how brilliantly and powerfully proclaimed.

Hans Küng in *Great Christian Thinkers* (1994) identifies Barth as one of a line of theologians—Paul, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Schleiermacher—

who effected a paradigm shift in theological understanding. But in his analysis of Barth, Küng claims that he initiated the paradigm shift to postmodernity but did not complete it. With great regard for Barth's accomplishments, Küng nevertheless confirms Bonhoeffer's claim made a half century ago.

Recognizing that the later Barth was reevaluating the knowledge of God available from the world of creation, natural theology, and world religions, Kung maintains

that in the end this dogmatic edifice conceived on such a large scale, stringently constructed and carefully built, had at least in principle (though most Barthians hardly noticed) been blown up!

It is Küng's contention that if Barth could start over, "he would attempt to work out a Christian theology in the context of the world religions and the world regions." How would Barth go about this, according to Küng?

He would have attempted to work out a responsible historical-critical dogmatics in the light of an exegesis with a historical-critical foundation, in order in this way to translate the original Christian message... for the future that had dawned in such a way that it was again understood as a liberating address from God. (120)

And, Küng contends, the "historical Jesus," apart from whom the "Christ of dogma" becomes a myth to be manipulated at will, might "again become of the utmost importance and urgency."

We have come, it would appear, full circle during the course of this century. The current reconsideration of Ernst Troeltsch stems from his early grasp of the implications of historical thinking for theological formulation. He was an interdisciplinary thinker at home in various realms of inquiry. He faced up to the demise of Eurocentricism and the relativity of all historical events and human knowledge – religious, philosophical, and scientific. Thus he acknowledged that Christian faith was relative to its largely Western orientation and environment. At the beginning of this century Troeltsch foresaw the global pluralism with which we are finally beginning to come to terms. In 1910, Burkitt was expressing the implication of a new way of thinking, thinking historically, thinking in terms of development, the evolving conception of truth. Such a way of thinking is widely accepted in our world, but it has been resisted in the conservative sectors of the church because it can lead to the morass of relativism and the denial of the Absolute and of absolute truth.

But such a result is not the necessary consequence of historical thinking. Rather, it can simply lead to the recognition expressed by Burkitt—that every human attempt to express absolute truth is only a relative expression—relative to one's cultural context—a partial grasp of the absolute that will always transcend any historically conditional expression. Further, that expression is possible only in symbolic form, by use of metaphor.

My purpose in introducing the limits and possibilities of historical thinking is in order to point the way to authentic and fruitful interreligious dialogue. Such dialogue is imperative for our world. The frightening prospect of a world in the throes of religious conflict makes it incumbent upon us to find a way to effect communication and mutual respect among the world religions. That will not be possible unless we are willing to apply the insights of historical thinking to the core credal development of Christology, including the various theories of the atonement that have been formulated throughout the centuries.

The Development of Doctrine

Burkitt was too confident in 1910. The twentieth century has not seen a fresh expression of the meaning of Jesus Christ in the church. Rather there has been strenuous resistance to any revisioning of core Christological formulations.

This resistance to revisioning has been pointed out by the Anglican priest John Bowden in *Jesus: The Unanswered Questions* (1988). He is troubled by the church's refusal to engage in serious discussion of the unavoidable questions surrounding Jesus that have arisen as our knowledge of the cultural context of his life and the checkered history of credal development have become apparent.

Bowden writes from the perspective of faith, from within the tradition of the Christian church, and for love of the faith and the church. But he raises the unanswered and disturbing questions that must be addressed if the church is to engage the spiritual quest of those for whom responsible, intelligent inquiry must accompany the commitment of faith. Thus, his purpose in writing is pastoral and positive. From a broad spectrum of research he has distilled the critical questions that demand a hearing.

Reflecting on his own theological training, he finds it remarkable that, after a thorough immersion in the historical-critical study of Scripture, he found quite a different approach to the history of Christian doctrine up to the year 451, the year of the Council of Chalcedon and the formulation of the classical statement about the natures of Jesus Christ. The theological reasoning and philosophical argument of those early centuries used the Bible in quite another fashion than he had learned to use it in his biblical studies. While the different cultural patterns of the early centuries of Christian dogmatic formulation were recognized, the conclusions of the church fathers were not to be questioned after Chalcedon; they were a given.

But, Bowden contends, the conclusions of those early centuries need to be questioned as seriously as the gospel record has been. Biblical criticism must be joined by doctrinal criticism that will examine the historical development in those early centuries that culminated in the classic credal definitions of Incarnation and Trinity, an historical development about which we have data enough to trace the interplay of cultural forces involving not only concern for the truth but political power plays and ecclesiastical intrigue. We really know the story. We

have simply refused to draw out the implications for this core credal affirmation. But until we do, we will not be able to engage in honest interreligious discussion.

Doctrinal formulation is a human enterprise. Human thought forms and human language are the tools of such formulation. To acknowledge that as fundamental for historical thinking is not a denial of absolute truth, as previously stated. It is only to recognize that any particular articulation of the truth cannot be absolutized and be raised to a status beyond further reflection and possible reformulation. It is simply to acknowledge that it is a given of our human historical condition that we are limited to relative apprehensions, partial understandings that need always to be adjusted in light of new information gathered from research and ongoing historical experience.

John Hick is a Christian thinker who has utilized the distinction between the Absolute and the respective relative apprehensions of the Absolute in the great world religions. Being a Christian, he has applied that insight to the development of the Christological formulations of the early centuries in the interest of developing a Christology in a pluralistic age.

Christology Revisited

John Hick has a ready grasp of the development of the Christian theological tradition as well as a deep knowledge of other religious traditions. For him, the window to the Real, to God, is Jesus and the Christian tradition. But he believes that the Real is apprehended through other traditions as well. Thus he believes there is a pluralism of ways of salvation. He argues his case in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (1993), in which he contends that the necessary revision of Christological understanding that alone can make way for genuine interreligious dialogue will involve “liberation from the network of theories—about Incarnation, Trinity and Atonement....”

Hick contends that

divine incarnation in its standard Christian form, in which both genuine humanity and genuine deity are insisted upon, has never been given a satisfactory literal sense; but that on the other hand it makes excellent metaphorical sense....We see in Jesus a human being extraordinarily open to God's influence and thus living to an extraordinary extent as God's agent on earth, “incarnating” the divine purpose for human life. He thus embodied within the circumstances of his time and place the ideal of humanity living in openness and response to God, and in doing so he “incarnated” a love that reflects the divine love. (12)

Hick, in a sense, is attempting to fulfill the task that in 1910 Burkitt foresaw as necessary if the church were going to face the consequences of the historical study of Christian origins and translate the figure of Jesus into an understanding meaningful to the twentieth century.

Yet, the work of translation does not proceed without resistance, as Bowden points out. In his opening chapter, Hick himself reviews the explosion that erupted following the publication in 1977 of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, a volume of essays by leading New Testament scholars and theologians, of which he was one. “Thundering sermons and clerical pronouncements,” along with articles in the British press called for the Anglicans among the authors to resign their orders, and publication of a flurry of conservative retorts erected a wall of opposition to the insights and implications as they were articulated in *The Myth of God Incarnate*. From the tenor of the responses, one would have thought nothing in the church’s understanding had been affected in spite of two hundred years of intensive research and discussion. While the results of the historical-critical study of the Bible had gained some acceptance, there obviously remained a formidable barrier to the same kind of investigation of the historical process that transformed Jesus of Nazareth into the ontological Son of God, second person of the Trinity, in the credal development of the fourth and fifth centuries.

Hick addresses the third element of the doctrinal triad he contends needs revisioning, the understanding of the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. He traces the history of the development of the doctrine, pointing out the cultural contexts that influenced the respective theories over the centuries. Then he asks, as in the case with other doctrines, what was the original experience out of which atonement theory arose, for it is that same gracious, liberating experience that we seek in our day.

Rejecting the idea of an objective justice requiring punishment for wrongdoing, a moral law that God can and must satisfy by punishing the innocent in place of the guilty, Hick searches for a way to express the idea of atonement in the broad sense, in the etymological meaning of at-one-ment becoming one with God—not ontologically but, rather, being in right relationship with God, being in a state of salvation. He points to Eastern Orthodoxy as a valuable source for understanding with its idea of restoration to the divine image, salvation as a process of transformation.

In such a view, “Jesus’ death was a piece with his life, expressing a total integrity in his self-giving to God; and his cross continues to inspire and challenge on a level that does not involve the atonement theories developed by the Churches.” With such an understanding of the death of Jesus, Hick is able to find similar meanings of salvation in other religious faiths. Thus he contends,

these different conceptions of salvation are specifications of what, in a generic formula, is the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the divine Reality....

The great world religions, then, are ways of salvation. Each claims to constitute an effective context within which the transformation of human existence can and does take place from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. (136)

With such a perspective, genuine interreligious dialogue can begin. It will become an empirical process of seeking to discover the fruits of the respective religions in human life. The alternative to such a stance is to bring to the discussion an understanding of atonement that necessitates a Christian absolutism of the exclusivist variety—that outside of the knowledge of and faith in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, salvation is not possible, or, an inclusivist view that salvation is only through Christ but explicit knowledge and trust are not necessary to receive the benefits of his death and resurrection.

The ranks of the exclusivists are thinning. Evangelicals are increasingly trying to find a broader arena for God's saving embrace. Clark Pinnock's *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* and John Sanders's *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* attempt this, although they thread a tortuous way because they have not yet shed an earlier view of biblical authority nor questioned the core Christological formulation.

Schubert Ogden suggests an alternative to Hick. In a 1993 address at the Divinity School in Chicago, he argued against the pluralists' claim as well as rejecting the claims of exclusivists and inclusivists alike. But in his approach there is also a re-visioning of the classical Christological formulations in which salvation is constituted through Jesus Christ alone. Rather than a *constitutive* Christology, Ogden argues for a *representative* Christology. In this view, the Christ event represents the claim that "salvation has always already been constituted by what Christians are wont to think and speak of as the primordial and everlasting love of God." Whether and where that love of God might elsewhere be represented is to be determined in the discussion without prior commitment to exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism. One simply enters the dialogue open to the truth claim of the other.

My intention is not to advocate Hick or Ogden or any other thinker who is addressing the matter of interreligious dialogue. Rather, I wish to point to the necessity of honestly drawing out the consequences of the recognition that human grasp of the truth develops, evolves, and needs ongoing assessment and adjustment—and sometimes conceptions need to be rejected. By use of historical imagination the originating experience that gave rise to a theological formulation needs to be recovered in order to express the same reality differently, in order to make the experience available in a totally different cultural context.

Rather than seeing this as a burden, a cause for fear and defensiveness, it should be seen as an exciting challenge. Is not such a pursuit of the truth to love God with mind as well as heart? And is not the recognition that every biblical and theological expression is marked by the human and historical limitations that adhere to all human thought the reason there is need for continual reformation? To be Reformed is not to be in possession of a set of timeless and eternal truths but, rather, to refuse to absolutize any human arrangement or formulation. It is

not to be saddled with a set of truths that were once new, innovative, and destabilizing of the established order of the sixteenth century, or the first century. It is an approach, a spirit, a posture that is open to new knowledge, fresh insight, and cumulative human experience within historical development.

The church has managed to spend the century in a state of schizophrenia, pursuing research in the academy and sharing the results in the lecture hall, while the liturgy, prayers, hymns, and sermons have given little evidence of the honest engagement with insights of the modern period.

My mentor, Hendrikus Berkhof, claimed the only heresy was to make the gospel boring. I would add another—the heresy of orthodoxy, the evidence of a failure of nerve and lack of trust in the living God. It is the heresy of an inordinate lust for certitude that seeks premature closure, the shutting down of the quest for truth and growth of knowledge in the magnificent and mysterious cosmos by the creatures whom the Creator calls to consciousness and embraces in a grace that pervades the unfolding cosmic process.

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