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Jacques Maritain's Anonymous Christianity

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Introduction

The phrase "anonymous Christianity" is generally associated with the German theologian Karl Rahner rather than with the French philosopher Jacques Maritain. Nevertheless, it is a phrase which accurately expresses an idea that was not only prominent in Maritain's more speculative writing, but which also, through its role in shaping his more practical, political philosophy, has been very influential in the Catholic Church over the last eighty years.

By "anonymous Christianity" I mean the claim that it is possible for a human being, even in this age of sacred history, to be justified, that is, transformed from a state of sin to a state of grace, without an explicit faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. This idea did not originate with Maritain; from the 16th century onwards, significant theologians have defended the idea that explicit knowledge of the incarnation is not an absolutely necessary requirement for justification for adults unable to hear the preaching of the gospel, and who believe in the existence and providence of God.[1] To give the example of a theologian personally well-known to Maritain: Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, in his commentary on the relevant part of the *Summa Theologiae*, seems ready, if rather reluctantly, to allow some place for anonymous Christianity in the sense just defined, despite acknowledging that the dominant Thomist tradition saw no exceptions to the requirement that, since Pentecost, someone in a state of sin must have explicit faith in Christ in order to be made just.[2]

Given that the theological hypothesis of "anonymous Christianity" did not originate with Maritain, why it is worthwhile to draw attention to *Maritain's* "anonymous Christianity"? For two reasons: first, because this theological hypothesis played a key role, but one often overlooked, in his political philosophy. Since this political philosophy

[1] I. A. de Aldama, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1961), vol. 3, tract. IV, para.174.

[2] Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Theological Virtues: On Faith,* trans. Thomas Reilly (St Louis: Herder, 1965), 224-25.

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has been highly influential in the Catholic world since the publication of *Humanisme Intégral* in 1936, it is important to understand its theological foundations. Secondly, Maritain's anonymous Christianity is of interest in that he attempted to provide an original philosophical explanation for this already existing theological hypothesis.

In this paper, I shall first show how the idea of anonymous Christianity played a key role in Maritain's political thought; secondly, I shall summarise the philosophical reflections by which he supported this theological idea. By way of conclusion I shall suggest some problems with Maritain's views.

An Anonymous Christendom

In the highly influential work, *Humanisme Intégral*, Maritain advocated what he called a "secular Christendom". By this he meant a society where Christianity would be the "soul" or inspiration of civic life, even though it would be given no special recognition by the law. However, he needed to show how this ideal or aspiration was compatible with the teaching of the 19th and early 20th century popes on the Catholic state and on the proper relations of the civil and ecclesiastical powers: this was a matter about which his work would often be challenged, both during his lifetime and afterwards. In particular, he was aware that just eleven years earlier, the still-reigning pope, Pius XI, had published the encyclical letter *Quas Primas*, on the kingship of Christ. In this encyclical, the pope had affirmed that Christ's kingship must be upheld no less in public life than in private life, by states no less than by individuals. The problem for Maritain was to explain in what sense Christ could be said to reign over a "secular Christendom" which would neither explicitly acknowledge Christ's authority nor grant the Catholic Church any favoured position. His response was that such a secular state could be said to be under the reign of Christ in that its laws would orient the citizens to the fulfilment of the natural law; for, as he assumes in accordance with the Council of Trent,[3] fallen man cannot fulfil the natural law without the grace of Christ. He writes:

> To be purely and simply a good and virtuous man firmly set in a state of moral rectitude, implies, in fact, the gifts of grace and charity, those 'infused virtues' which rightly merit, since they come from Christ and in union with Him, the name of Christian virtues, even when in consequence of some obstacle for which he is not responsible the subject of them is ignorant of or alien to the profession of Christianity. It follows from this that a city animated and guided by such elements

[3] Cf. Council of Trent, Session VI, *Decree on Justification*, chapter 1 and canon 1.

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> will in reality be to an extent (and in that wholly relative sense in which these things must be understood in the temporal order) under the reign of Christ.[4]

Within the dense rhetoric of *Humanisme Intégral,* it is easy to miss the importance of these two sentences for Maritain's project of a new, secular Christendom. He is here basing his desired society on the claim that men may possess the infused virtues of faith, hope and charity even while being "ignorant of or alien to the profession of Christianity". It is only because, on this view, non-Christians can have supernatural faith even while not professing and, at least in the normal sense of the word, not wishing to profess Christianity, that it is possible for Catholics like Maritain to aim at building a secular, pluralist society without deviating from the goal set before them by papal teaching of building a society where Christ shall reign. Without anonymous Christianity, all non-Christians would be in principle unable to attain the kind of civic life which the new Christendom aims at, and hence they would necessarily be, directly contrary to Maritain's wish, something less than full citizens.

It is important to note that it is indeed all human beings, whatever their religious professions or lack of them, who are able in Maritain's view, without changing their religious self-identification, to be justified by the grace of Christ and therefore to be full citizens of the new, secular Christendom. In *Humanisme Intégral* he explicitly asserts this even of atheists. Speaking of the grace that according to St Thomas Aquinas is made available to each child at the moment of reaching the age of reason, he writes:

> If this grace is not rejected, the soul in question … believes obscurely in the true God and really chooses Him, even when in good faith it is in error and adheres, not by its own fault, but by that of the education it has received, to a philosophical system of atheism, and conceptualises this faith in the true God under formulas which deny Him. An atheist of good faith would thus, against his own apparent choice, really choose God as the true end of his life.[5]

Similarly, in a talk entitled "Qui est mon prochain?" ("Who is my neighbour?"), delivered not long after the publication of *Humanisme Intégral*, he stated that even "poor idolaters" can have this justifying grace "if they are of good faith and if their hearts are pure".[6] It is noteworthy however that neither in *Humanisme Intégral* nor in "Qui

[4] J. Maritain, *True Humanism* (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1938), 163.

[5] Ibid., 57.

[6] J. Maritain, 'Who is my neighbour?', in *Redeeming the Time* (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1943), 107.

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est mon prochain?" does Maritain quote any past or contemporary theologian, let alone any magisterial document, in support of his view that atheists and idolaters may possess sanctifying grace and the theological virtues.[7]

Some writings from the last period of Maritain's life show how widely, in his view, anonymous Christianity extends. In *The Peasant of the Garonne,* published in 1966, he writes that "since we cannot judge another's heart, we must naturally *presuppose* that the non-Christian to whom we are speaking possesses grace and charity".[8] To do the contrary, for example to assume that someone who says that he does not believe in God really does not believe in God in his heart, springs, Maritain maintains, from a naive unawareness of the complexity of human psychology. In similar vein, he asks in his 1970 work *On the Church of Christ*: "Who would dare to say … that there are more saved among the Christians than among the non-Christians?"[9]

To summarise: what had been suggested by some theologians as a theoretical possibility for certain adult theists living in regions where the gospel had not been sufficiently preached - namely, the reception of the grace of justification without explicit awareness of the mysteries of the incarnation and the Trinity - becomes for Maritain a widespread actuality, frequently extending even to contemporary western agnostics and atheists, living in lands where Christianity has been dominant for centuries. And this bold theological position is fundamental to Maritain's influential political philosophy.

The First Act of Freedom

What philosophical underpinning does Maritain offer for anonymous Christianity, and for his belief in its widespread existence? For this we must go to an essay entitled "The Immanent Dialectic of the First Act of Freedom", published in *Nova et Vetera* in 1945, and appearing

[7] It is therefore surprising that Charles Journet, in a private letter to Maritain, said of the essay "Qui est mon prochain?": "I found nothing in it which could cause any of the theologians to take offence" ("Je n'ai rien trouvé qui puisse porter ombrage à personne parmi les théologiens", letter of 1st July 1939 in Claude Favez, Jacqueline Favre et al. (ed.) *Journet-Maritain Corrrespondance* (Fribourg: Fondation du Cardinal Journet, Editions Universitaires, 1997), vol. 2: 680. Perhaps Journet's esteem for Maritain led him to overlook the novelty of his friend's position.

[8] J. Maritain, *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (Paris: Desclee de Bouwer, 1966), 121.

[9] J. Maritain, *On the Church of Christ: the Person of the Church and her Personnel*, trans. Joseph Evans (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Indiana, 1973), chapter X, section II, available on-line at https://www3.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/otcoc10.htm (accessed 18th August 2015).

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in English in the collection of essays called *The Range of Reason*, published in 1953.[10]

This essay begins with an idea to which allusion has already been made, namely the thesis maintained by St Thomas Aquinas, that the moral life properly speaking starts when a child first deliberates about his ultimate end. According to St Thomas, to be a free agent, each child must of metaphysical necessity first freely choose some ultimate end toward which all his future free actions will be ordered. This first free choice marks the beginning of the age of reason. Maritain fully accepts this thesis of Aquinas, and he analyses this moment of choice of the ultimate end closely, first from a merely natural point of view, then from a supernatural point of view.

Analysing the matter from the merely natural point of view, Maritain holds that a child may very well deliberate about its last end without adverting to the idea of God, and simply because it has been confronted with a choice between moral good and moral evil. A rather long quotation will serve to explain his thought. He is using the example of a choice between telling the truth and lying:

> Here is a child who refrains from telling a lie, under circumstances which, in themselves, are trivial. On a certain day he refrains from lying not because he is likely to be punished if he is caught, or because he has been told not to lie and is afraid of grown-ups, or because he does not want to grieve his mother. He refrains from telling a lie, because lying is wrong. It would not be right to tell a lie. That would not be *good.* Doubtless, he has already known of all sorts of little things labelled good or evil by his parents and his teachers; social custom has tamed him into doing the former and not doing the latter. But this time it is no longer a question of a kind of conditioned reflex. When he thinks: "It would not be *good* to do this," what is confusedly revealed to him, in a flash of understanding, is the moral good, with the whole mystery of its demands.
>
> He is face to face with this mystery, and he is all alone. And it is the first time that he himself governs his own practical behaviour, as a human being, according to this standard: the moral good, consciously perceived in an idea whose representative content is doubtless meagre and confused, at the level of a child's intellect, but whose intuitive intensity and intentional value may be singularly powerful. *Bonum honestum; kalokagathon.* At this moment and all at once - but *in actu exercito*, not *in actu signato*, in a merely lived, not signified, manner - he has reflected upon himself or "deliberated about himself," and come to a decision about the direction of his life; he has answered the question "What do you live for?" He will not remember this event any more than the day when, from the midst of images, the life of reason and of universal ideas awakened in him. For what took place was

[10] J. Maritain, 'The Immanent Dialectic of the First Act of Freedom' in *The Range of Reason* (London: Geoffrey Bles,1953).

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> not a philosophical discovery of his ego, but a spontaneous reflection involved in a practical process whose object was not, by any means, extraordinary or exceptional; and it is toward the object, not the event which goes on within himself, that the attention of the child is always turned.[11]

Maritain, then, is arguing that the moral life begins when a child reaches a knowledge, albeit confused, of the *bonum honestum* or moral good, and therefore chooses either in accordance with or contrary to this knowledge; and that the child who chooses in accordance with this knowledge, by choosing the *bonum honestum* for its own sake, thereby attains a true knowledge of God. How does knowledge of the moral good imply knowledge of God? First, Maritain argues that the very notion of the *bonum honestum*, and the concomitant notion of "a law of human acts transcending all facts", implies the existence of a separate or subsisting goodness which is the basis of this moral law, namely, of God. In this sense, a knowledge of God is implicit in the knowledge of the *bonum honestum,* whether one chooses in accordance with it or not. However, this is not what Maritain has in mind, when he says that the child who chooses well comes to know God. He has in mind, rather, the interplay or "dialectic" that exists between the will and the intellect. For in choosing the good for its own sake, the will is in fact primarily loving the subsisting goodness, that is God Himself; and this very movement of the will towards subsisting goodness, according to Maritain, produces in the child's intellect a knowledge of the same ultimate end. He writes as follows:

> The child does not think explicitly of God, or of his ultimate end. He thinks of what is good and of what is evil. But by the same token he knows God, without being aware of it. He knows God because, by virtue of the of the internal dynamism of his choice of the good for the sake of the good, he wills and loves the Separate Good as ultimate end of his existence . . . . In other words the will, hiddenly, secretly, obscurely moving . . . down to the term of the immanent dialectic of the first act of freedom, goes *beyond* the immediate object of conscious and explicit knowledge (the moral good as such); and it carries with itself, down to that *beyond,* the intellect, which at this point no longer enjoys the use of its regular instruments, and, as a result, is only actualized below the threshold of reflective consciousness, in a night without concept and without utterable knowledge.[12]

In other words, the will, in willing, carries the intellect with it, in such a way that the intellect will know more than it can say. It will have a certain kind of knowledge of that which the will

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

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is ultimately willing, that is, of God. Maritain variously describes this knowledge of God that comes by means of the will as "purely practical, non-conceptual and non-conscious", and as "volitional and inexpressible". He also states that it can co-exist with a theoretical ignorance of God. He does not however wish to call it an *implicit* knowledge of God, arguing that the term implicit only makes sense in regard to conceptual knowledge, one object being implicit in the concept of another, whereas here the intellect is not informed by any concept, but, "by the movement of the appetite toward the moral good precisely considered as good". Interestingly, he does not refer to this knowledge, as we might expect, as "knowledge by connaturality". The phrase "knowledge by connaturality" is used in the Thomist tradition, and frequently by Maritain himself in other domains, to refer to a way of knowing where the appetite, in the broad sense, comes to the aid of the intellect, so that one may reach a correct judgement about something without having to go through a process of reasoning. To use St Thomas's customary example: a man who has the virtue of chastity can make a correct judgement about what is good or bad in the area of chastity by means of the attraction or repulsion that he experiences, and without having to reason as a moral philosopher would. If Maritain does not refer to this "volitional and non-conceptual" awareness of God as "knowledge of God by connaturality", it is perhaps because this latter phrase is reserved, in the Thomistic vocabulary, for a mystical experience made possible by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

To sum up this first level of Maritain's analysis of the first act of freedom. In order to posit a fully free act, a child must reach the idea of the *bonum honestum*; the child who acts for the sake of the *bonum honestum*, for example by telling the truth simply because it is good to do so, has a will directed primarily to the subsisting goodness, that is, to God, and an intellect which is itself informed by this good direction of the will, in such a way that the child has a real but inexpressible and even non-conscious knowledge of God.

We come now to the second stage of Maritain's analysis, where he considers the child's first act of freedom from a supernatural perspective, taking into account, that is, both the fallen state of mankind and our supernatural goal. It is important to note that these are two analyses of the same initial act of freedom, and not analyses of two successive events in the child's life.

In accordance with Catholic teaching,[13] Maritain takes for granted that fallen man cannot efficaciously love God as his highest end without grace. In other words, the dedication of oneself to the good as such, which he has mentioned in his 'natural' analysis of the first

[13] Cf. Council of Trent, Session VI, *Decree on Justification*, chapter 1 and canon 1.

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act of freedom, will only be possible for fallen man by means of divine grace. He therefore concludes that grace, which he refers to here as "the influx of God", is offered both to the will and to the intellect of every child who reaches the age of reason. He argues further that man's fallen state and his supernatural end imply that the moral good must be presented to the child under a particular aspect, if the child is to love it in a way that corresponds adequately to his existential condition:

> Let us suppose that ... the moral good, through the influx of God, appears to the intellect not only as what is in order, not only as what it is right to do, but as the *good by means of which "I shall be saved,"* the good by means of which some mysteriously precious part of me will escape misfortune and find its way home. (And this is an inevitably defective attempt to express a flash of intuition in discursive terms.) Then it is *the Separate Good as a refuge and salvation*, through Whom my most precious being will be safe if I seek Him, it is God *as Saviour,* that is the goal of the movement of my will, and adhered to by my intellect, by means of the volitional and inexpressible knowledge I have described.[14]

What is Maritain suggesting here? According to his former analysis, the intellect's concept of "the moral good" allows the will to move towards the moral good as such and therefore primarily towards the subsisting good, i.e. God Himself, thus causing the intellect to gain a non-conceptual or "volitional" knowledge of God. He is now arguing that something similar may be said when one analyses the same event from a supernatural perspective. In this perspective, the concept of "the moral good by which I shall be saved" allows the will to move toward the moral good under this aspect, that is, ultimately, toward the subsisting good as Saviour. And because the will carries the intellect with it, this makes possible, thanks to the continuing influx of God, an adhesion of the intellect to the same object, that is, to the subsisting God as Saviour; it makes possible, in fact, an adhesion of the intellect to God which is an act of faith.

> Under the light of faith the Saviour-God toward Whom the élan of the will moves has become the object of a non-conceptual ... knowledge which comes about through the instrumentality of this very élan of the will.

God thus uses the rectitude of the will itself, directed towards the saving good, as a means to bring about the act of faith, even in the absence of any conceptualized thought of God as Saviour. Indeed, this knowledge, brought about by the movement of the will toward God as Saviour, is not only non-conceptual and inexpressible, but something

[14] J. Maritain, 'The Immanent Dialectic ...'

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of which the child himself is unaware. According to our author, this act of faith "remains below the threshold of consciousness, or crosses that threshold only in remaining inexpressible to reflective consciousness."[15]

> It is a knowledge which does not proceed by the formal instrumentality of concepts, but it is a knowledge which plunges into darkness as soon as it sets forth from the intuition and more or less confused concept of the moral and salutary good; it is a knowledge in which the soul does not even know that it knows.

In other words, the result of choosing well at the first moment of having the full use of reason, is that the child who does not already possess supernatural faith through baptism gains such faith, but a faith which is non-conscious.

In later works, particularly in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry,* published in 1953, and *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, published in 1968, Maritain will speak more extensively about the idea of non-conscious knowledge, distinguishing what he calls "the preconscious of the spirit in its living springs, and the unconscious of blood and flesh, instincts, tendencies, complexes, repressed images and desires, traumatic memories".[16] He also suggests that the latter, namely the "unconscious of blood and flesh", is what is discussed in Freudian psycho-analysis, whereas the former, the "preconscious of the spirit", or as he also calls it, the "supraconscious of the spirit", is a notion that has remained hitherto unexplored. In any case, in his account of the first act of freedom, while the knowledge of moral good and salutary moral good are objects of conscious knowledge, God and God precisely under the aspect of Saviour are not objects of conscious knowledge.

Furthermore, it is not only the child in his first act of freedom who can make an act of supernatural faith without consciously adverting to God and despite perhaps being, as Maritain says, "permeated with the formulas of an atheistic education". According to our author, the same thing can occur also in an adult "when, by means of a decisive act of free will, he changes the essential direction of his moral life". And in the adult too, this unconscious faith in God as Saviour may never break through into consciousness. It may be possessed, Maritain tells us, even by a man who is ready to give his life for the cause of atheism.

In sum, Maritain proposed in his 1945 essay, "The Immanent Dialectic of the First Act of Freedom" that because of the close

[15] *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry,* (London: The Harvill Press, 1953), especially pp. 91-99; *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus,* trans. Joseph Evans (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), pp. 49 ff.

[16] *Creative Intuition*, 91-92.

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interaction, or "dialectic", that exists between the human intellect and the human will, a person may obtain supernatural, salvific faith, without giving a conscious assent to even the most basic articles of the Creed, such as God's existence and providence. It suffices that the person have the concept of "the moral good as salutary", and tend toward this object by his free will. This produces a lived but unconceptualized awareness of the good toward which the will is tending, or in other words, an unconscious, but supernatural act of justifying faith.

Criticisms and Conclusion

Maritain's anonymous Christianity raises many great questions. The first is the question which confronts any form of anonymous Christianity, namely, whether such a doctrine is in principle compatible with the sources of the faith and the declarations of the Church's magisterium. Since this is not as such a difficulty peculiar to Maritain's version of the doctrine, I shall not dwell on it here.

However, his extension of the doctrine of anonymous Christianity to atheists, and his philosophical defence of this extension, involve further difficulties, in regard both to the internal coherence of his thought and to its compatibility with Catholic doctrine.[17]

We have seen that he argues that justification may take place without conceptual or even conscious knowledge of the One who justifies. A child, or even an adult, may thus make an act of faith in God without being conscious of doing so, and in such a way that he may nevertheless sincerely profess himself an atheist. But is the notion of 'unconscious faith' coherent? Faith seems to be a pre-eminently *personal* relation between the one who believes and God in whom one believes.[18] And it does not seem possible to have a personal relation with someone without being aware of it. Again, according to Catholic doctrine, faith involves assenting to something because God has said it.[19] But this is not the kind of thing that can happen without being conscious that the God who has said it exists.

[17] Maritain's extension of the grace of justification to atheists was criticised by his Argentinian adversary, Jules Meinvielle, as incompatible with chapter one of the Letter to the Romans; cf. Jules Meinvielle, *De Lamennais à Maritain* (Paris: La Cité Catholique, n.d.), 151-52. One may also wonder what St Paul would have made of the "idolaters with pure hearts" mentioned in "Qui est mon prochain?".

[18] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 150: "Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed."

[19] Cf. ibid., "Faith is . . . a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed", and ibid. 155: "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace."

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In much the same way, a man cannot marry a woman while being unaware of her existence.

To pursue this latter point: St Pius X taught, in the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* and in the Oath against Modernism, that "faith is not a blind sentiment of religion welling up from the depths of the subconscious under the impulse of the heart and the motion of a will trained to morality, but a genuine assent of the intellect to truth received by hearing from an external source." Maritain's position seems incompatible with this account of faith. For although, unlike the modernists, he thinks of faith as a supernatural habitus infused by God, what is lacking on his account is any proposing to the child from an external source of truths to be believed by means of this habitus. For unless he wishes to maintain that God directly bears witness to each child that he must embrace the salutary moral good, which would make the child into a prophet, and therefore also necessarily conscious of God's existence, how can the child, in Maritain's picture, be said to receive any truth "by hearing from an external source"? To hear a truth means to be aware of receiving it from someone else. But on Maritain's account, the notion of the salutary moral good, rather than being received by hearing, apparently irrupts into the child's consciousness with no sign of where it has come from and without the child's choosing to accept it on the authority of another person. Even if God *causes* the child to reach the notion of the salutary moral good, the child is not thereby hearing and believing God, neither on His own immediate testimony, as the prophets do, nor as mediated by a human preacher who tells him what God has said. Likewise, when I see that $2 + 2 = 4$, then even though God causes in me the light of reason by which I may know this truth, I cannot be said to have heard God saying it to me, which is why I do not have faith that $2 + 2 = 4$. For, as St Paul said long before the promulgation of the anti-Modernist Oath, faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17).

In conclusion, Maritain's views on anonymous Christianity are of great interest, both in themselves, and as the support for his influential political project of a secular Christendom. I suggest, however, that despite the sincerity and subtlety with which he developed them, and the charity toward non-Christians and atheists that doubtless motivated them, they are problematic for the Catholic theologian.

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