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Religion and Web History

Introduction

It was the English explorer Sir Walter Raleigh who wrote that if ‘whosoever in writing a modern history, shall follow truth too near the heels, it may haply strike out his teeth’ (Raleigh, 1614: preface). Raleigh’s remark, written in 1614 and often quoted since, showed the danger for the historian in writing about the very recent past. For historians of contemporary religion, the difficulties are greater still, in that we follow close on the heels not only of the present, but of scholars in several other disciplines who study religions in something close to real time. The literature on the phenomenon of religion in computer-mediated contexts is now very large, having built up over two decades. That literature is also produced both in, and in the spaces between, more than one discipline: Internet Studies, which concerns itself with the nature of the medium (see the survey by Campbell, 2011); the sociology of religion (for example, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour, 2016); and from scholars of religious studies concerned in particular with the relationship between religion and the media in general (Beckerlegge, 2001; Mitchell and Marriage, 2003). The disciplinary labels vary between countries, but however it is named, little of this writing concerns itself directly with the kind of questions that most preoccupy historians, although in time it will itself become the raw material for historical study, much as the pioneering religious social science now is for historians of the 1960s.¹

¹ For instance, the work of the educationalist Harold Loukes on religious attitudes amongst British teenagers is now a key source for historians of the 1950s and 1960s: H. Loukes (1961), *Teenage Religion* (London: SCM Press).

Given both the size and the methodological eclecticism of the literature to hand, this chapter can make no claim to exhaustiveness. Rather, its first half attends to some debates of particular historical and methodological note with which the emerging history of religions on the Web may fruitfully be brought into conversation. These include debates concerning both the Web itself as a technological system, and religious responses to technological change in general. It also sets out some points of contact between Web history and three key themes in contemporary religious history: secularisation; religious radicalism; and the place of religion in civic life and the law. It also argues for a fresh integration of the Web, and the archived Web in particular, with the study of offline religion, in pursuit of an ideal state in which the archived Web is merely one of many kinds of primary sources with which historians work.

The second half then takes a fourfold schema of different aspects of religions as they may be studied, setting out an agenda for future Web history research in each aspect. The references cited throughout the chapter are indicative and exemplary of particular questions and approaches, rather than specific recommendations of this or that piece of work in its substantive claims. The chapter as a whole takes its examples predominantly from the Christian tradition, but would assert that the picture it paints has a more general applicability.

Religious views of the Web as a system

Both the Internet and the Web have been screens onto which all manner of cultural and social aspirations and fears, both utopian and dystopian, have been projected, both strictly relating to religion and more widely. The Internet has been feted as a great disruptor: a solvent of established privilege and the outlet for previously marginal opinions, and a liberator of suppressed creative energy, in politics, commerce and the arts. It has equally well been denounced as the harbour of criminality, the accelerator of falsehood, the destroyer of traditional industries, communities, languages and cultures (Krotoski, 2014). Whilst these twin discourses of technological utopia and dystopia have been widespread, religious thinkers have themselves also adopted versions of both (an example of the latter is Shallis, 1984). To a degree, a utopian accent was also audible in some of the early scholarship in Internet Studies

in general, and on the religious Web in particular (Hoejsgaard and Warburg, 2005; Wellman, 2011:18–19) The degree to which both crazes and moral panics are a natural accompaniment to far-reaching technological change need not detain us here. But both positive and negative discourses of the Web have been expressed in both implicit and explicit theological, or at least ethical and moral, terms. If we are to understand the engagement of religious people and institutions with the Web, we must attend to the history of the paradigms in which they conceive of the Web as a system.

This task would be relatively straightforward were it not for a significant strand of secular thinking that viewed both the Internet and the Web in quasi-mystical terms *as technologies*; a trend which owed something to the Christian and post-Christian culture of the West out of which it grew (see, for instance, Davis, 1998, *passim*). This particular phenomenon is also related to what David E. Nye dubbed the ‘technological sublime’, in which new technologies become objects of awe and wonder (Nye, 1994; see also Mosco, 2004). The term *cyberspace* – a spatial metaphor where none was necessarily required by the intrinsic nature of the technology – has indirectly given occasion to considerable philosophical, not to say mystical, reflection on the online as an alternative plane of existence, even as reflective of the nature of God: a fifth dimension, in a sense (Burke, 2016: 158; Cobb, 1998). These understandings are ripe for historical examination (for which, see Webster, 2018b), but here one observes simply that to understand the history of the idea of the Web must involve attending to these discourses, their origins and their mutations over time.

As well as understanding religious and quasi-religious paradigms of the nature of the Web as a system, historians have also the task of attending to what might be termed the ‘religious Web’. I define this as the sum of the activities of, and interactions between, religious institutions and those individuals who articulate or act out their own religious faith online. (An alternative designation might be the ‘religious Web sphere’). Historians of this religious Web need also to attend to the ethical and philosophical frameworks in which religious people have tended to view their specific activities online. To take Christians in

Europe and North America as an example, some of the early dystopian visions of the computerised future were not the product of ignorance and fear of change but of concerns about key ethical issues. To question the economic effects of the Web on certain industries or on certain countries was to make a statement about economic justice based on much older Christian understandings of neighbourliness between citizens and between nations. To express concern about the distancing effect of computer mediation on human relationships was to make a statement about the nature of the human person and the relational nature of God himself (see, for instance, Houston, 1998; Lochhead, 1997; Webster, 2018b). Concerns about the effect of anonymity on online behaviour are intimately connected with much older concerns about the spiritually damaging effect of dissimulation on the individual: of portraying oneself as someone other than the person visible to God. The rationalisation by American evangelicals observed by Kelsy Burke – that anonymity was acceptable since God Himself was witness to their conduct online – bears comparison with the thinking of Protestants under threat of persecution and death in Catholic countries in the Reformation period (Burke, 2016: 158; Dixon, 1997: 144–9; Pettegree, 1996: 85–96). These various debates about a cluster of technologies and their social and economic effects are as much a part of the history of the religious Web as individual sites and pages.

The relationship of online and offline

Some early studies of religion on the Web were marked by a concentration of attention on the online alone: what one scholar has referred to as ‘immanent Internet analysis’ (Krüger, 2005: 17). This was unsurprising as scholars came to terms with the nature of the medium and the new methods required to study it. More recently there has been greater attention paid to the interaction between online and offline. Recent studies have attended to the relationship between the two in theory, and in particular to the direction in which influence is exerted: the degree to which offline roles and organisations are reflected online, and (conversely) the degree to which the online experience changes the expectations that religious people have of their face-to-face relationships with others (for example, Becker, 2011; Lundby, 2011). At the

same time, more empirical studies have employed an approach that uses the evidence of the Web in combination with other sources, such as direct observation and interview evidence with key actors (Krüger, 2005; Burke, 2016). These have been accompanied by calls for a multi-modal approach, or (to translate the matter into historical terms), the integrated study of many classes of primary source (Cheong et al., 2016). This to be welcomed, and when viewed in terms of the history of the discipline of history, parallels the methodological work done to incorporate new or neglected kinds of sources, such as broadcast media, recorded music or material culture simply as particular kinds of primary source amongst many (see, for example, Harvey, 2009).

In this respect, the study of history using the *archived* Web is a step behind again. The history of Web archiving itself is only 20 years long, and scholarly engagement with the archives produced younger still (Webster, 2017b). Given this, historians using Web archives are themselves in the process of understanding the nature of the material with which they must deal, and consequently have been less concerned with its integration with other kinds of sources. In this sense this body of work is at the same stage of development as that of scholars of online religion perhaps 15 years ago. The (so far) small number of studies of religious history using Web archives have begun to retrieve the element of change over time that is often missing from other disciplines, but without yet an integration with other source types, in some cases explicitly so (Hofheinz, 2010: 106; Webster, 2017a: 202). Use of the historic Web which is both diachronic and multi-modal must be the aim; only at that point will the enterprise look like historical research as commonly understood.

Longer-range historical questions

For religious historians there is another and rather larger task at hand: to relate the development of religion on the Web to larger and longer-range questions of religious history. This presents problems, since very few historians of religion have begun serious study of periods more recent than the late 1980s. As such, what follows is a projection forward in time

of three particular historical debates currently underway regarding the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s which are germane to the more recent past. The examples given here are particularly pertinent in European and North American contexts, and historians of the non-Western world will have different sets of problems and preoccupations to which to refer, but certain similarities may be observed.

Perhaps pre-eminent is the continuing legacy of secularisation. Religious historians are still deeply engaged in understanding how European, North American and Australasian nations – once religiously homogenous with highly observant populations, socially powerful churches and legal systems which privileged Judeo-Christian moral principles – became religiously diverse societies, with secularised systems of law, increasingly non-religious populations and relatively insignificant churches. Secularisation theory in its classic form attributed great agency to economic, social and technological modernisation in the weakening of religious belief and adherence (for a summary in relation to the Web in particular, see Han, 2016: 1–11). In more recent years, greater stress has been placed not so much on economic and political change as on change in the terms of religious discourse, and also on the ways in which religious practice has not so much declined as mutated (see, *inter alia*, Brown, 2009, and Davie, 2000). Others have stressed the significant *growth* in religious practice outside the mainstream Christian denominations, and of the so-called New Religious Movements (Goodhew, 2012; Hunt, 2003). The present literature on online religion speaks both directly and obliquely to these concerns in particular contemporary contexts, but without beginning the work of understanding them in historical terms. Insofar as the Web as a technology may be understood as an agent of modernisation, how far can it be said to have been either inimical to or supportive of religious belief and practice as understood before the Web came about? Understanding to what degree the religious Web is a reflection of social changes occurring offline according to their own logic, as opposed to (or as well as) being an agent in fostering, shaping or hindering those changes, is perhaps the major challenge for contemporary religious historians of the next generation.

Secondly, the events of 9/11 may in time come to be seen as epoch-making and epoch-ending: the kind of marker with which historians divide the past into periods that may be examined and understood, such as 1789 or 1914. But the religious radicalisation of which the attacks on the United States and elsewhere in subsequent years were a symptom had a long pre-history, bound up in part with the wider ‘clash of civilisations’ identified by Samuel P. Huntington (1997). There was as well a specific history of the growth and strengthening of conservative elements in several of the world religions, intimately connected to the progress (or otherwise) of secularisation, into which it is now time to begin placing the history of the Web (Herbert and Wolffe, 2005; McLeod, 2007: 207–12). Is it the case that the affordances of the Web have sharpened religious radicalism, as people more easily encounter those things to which they object? Alternatively, the story may be one of a pre-existing radicalism, growing according both to its own logic, the communication of which is facilitated and made more visible. Only a reading of religious radicalism on the Web alongside its offline history will provide answers to these questions. (For an example of such work, see Howard, 2011).

Thirdly, the lifetime of the Web has also coincided with a sharply renewed public debate concerning the place of religious faith, speech and practice in public life, in relation to the law in particular. In part this is a function of debates to which the growth of the Internet itself gave greater force: over censorship, freedom of speech, and the idea of hate speech and its subjection to criminal or civil law penalties. But the questions are wider, taking in the right or otherwise of both religious and non-religious people to protection from religious offence; the place of religious buildings, rituals and symbolic objects in local communities; the right or otherwise to religious expression in the workplace. Each of these has its own histories in different cultures. In the Christian West these include the de-Christianisation of the secular law, which has unfolded piecemeal over several decades; the history of integration of immigrant communities and the contested urban spaces which they often inhabit; and the rise of more assertive atheist and non-religious voices, partly in reaction to the increased religious conservatism noted above (Amarasingam, 2010; Garnett and Harris, 2013; Webster, 2015a: 65–90). Just as with secularisation and the growth of conservatism, any history of religion and

the Web must attend to the ways in which these debates are played out online, and the interplay of local, physically bounded events with their networked representations.

An historical model of religions

The remainder of this chapter considers the recent history of religion on the Web under four heads. The first of these is doctrine and religious knowledge: the symbols and forms of words that describe the divine, the world, the human person and their interrelations. Second are religious organisations and their representatives (clerical or lay), which are mostly responsible for the codification and interpretation of doctrine and the framing and regulation of communal ritual. Third is religious practice: those communal and solitary activities of prayer, worship and other rituals through which religious people address the divine and represent their religion to each other and to others. Finally, the section on religions and the Other deals with all the various modes in which religious people and organisations encounter those outside: as potential proselytes, as discussion partners in debate about wider social and economic issues, and as antagonists.

Doctrine

Many of the major world religions are textual to some significant degree. Sacred texts – some directly given by God, others created by humans acting in response to divine prompting – provide perhaps the principal way in which doctrine is fixed and transmitted. Surrounding sacred scripture is a wealth of commentary, exposition and critique, written variously by priestly figures, by those whose profession it is to think and write, and by those in the wider circle of believers. The earliest affordances of the Web were ideal for the reproduction of text; it was technically straightforward, and economic at a time when many users paid for their usage by the metering of data. Many of the earliest ventures of religious organisations onto the Web were in the reproduction of texts, both for study by the devout and in order to engage

others (to adopt the distinction made by Hutchings, 2016). In the case of the Bible, this built on pre-existing ventures in software designed for study, dating back as far as the 1950s.

When compared with the interactions between individuals (examined below under 'Religious Practice') these early ventures in a new form of religious publishing have attracted relatively little scholarly attention. This may have been in part because, for scholars of the Web as a technology, this represented a use of the medium of limited technical inventiveness. But opportunities abound, particularly using the archived Web, not only for historians of religion, but also of education, publishing, media and reading. From the very beginning, to what extent did the move online represent a duplication of print publishing or a replacement of it? What opposition did it arouse, and on what grounds? More recent years have seen the advent of social media accounts, notably on Twitter, publishing single verses of a sacred text at a time. Sociologists of religion have already asked questions about the effect this may have had on reading habits (Hutchings, 2016). Historians might also ask what relation such practices bear to the evangelical Christian culture of the Bible verse on a car bumper sticker, poster or bookmark (Harvey, 2008).

There are also questions, the asking of which the scale of Web archives allows. Scholars of the nineteenth century have made inventive use of corpora of digitised books and newspapers to reconstruct the flow of texts from publication to publication across great geographical distances (Beals, 2016). The archived Web now affords rich opportunities to observe the spread of religious texts from site to site, and their different framing and interpretation in each new publication context. There is an opportunity now to examine the ways in which religious organisations have sought to control the reuse of these texts, by use of copyright law or other means, and for which reasons.

As well as examining the lives sacred texts lead online, another fruitful area of inquiry is the effect the Web has had on the shaping of religious texts themselves: not so much ancient texts as theological and other writings which are still being produced. It seems likely that the content of preaching has been changed by the ready accessibility of a vast range of texts and

other resources online (not least other sermons), previously unobtainable by, and perhaps also unknown to, local ministers. The time is also ripe for an historical assessment of the effect of the Web on the disciplines of theology and religious studies, both in terms of the availability of primary texts for research, but also in the field of Open Access publishing. It is likely that the present chapter could not have been written, or at least would have been very different, without being able to locate and then access scholarship on every religious tradition in many nations. One of the oldest online theological periodicals celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2013; a span of time which invites serious historical reflection (Keown and Prebish, 2013).

Organisations

A prominent theme in much of the scholarship so far has been that of the authority of religious institutions and their representatives. Studying the spirituality of Generation X in 1998, Tom Beaudoin identified a suspicion of institutions as one of its four key markers (Beaudoin, 1998: 56–60). Not unlike other institutions and industries being ‘disrupted’ by the Web, religious institutions were faced with the most fundamental of capitalist forces, a competition of ideas, and for attention and for loyalty. Intimately connected with broader narratives of the culture of the Web as ‘virtual communitarian’ and entrepreneurial (Castells, 2001: 36–63), part of the early utopian narrative was about a new religious freedom. This might be the freedom to experiment with new forms of organisation whilst still in good standing with an existing institution, or to extend the range of activities of that institution to meet needs hitherto unmet (Prebish, 2004: 145; Burke, 2016, *passim*). It might equally include the freedom to found new religious movements entirely outside, and indeed possibly inimical to, existing institutions (Hoejsgaard, 2005).

Each of those aspects continues to merit investigation, but the literature has also seen a more recent turn to try to understand the organisations themselves: the degree to which organisations and people with authority within them adapt the way their authority is articulated and gains assent. Based on a case study from Chinese Buddhism, Cheong et al.

(2016) outlined a phenomenon of ‘strategic arbitration’ in which authoritative figures were able to re-define their offline authority to include a role as ‘arbiters of knowledge and encounters’ online as well as offline. Heidi Campbell’s study of the blogs of American Christians stressed the degree to which bloggers were also already clergy or other authoritative figures in their local churches: here, authority offline is replicated online rather than overturned (Campbell, 2010).

Even this more nuanced examination of institutional adaptation has tended to be at the level of the individual. The growing availability of the archived Web at scale now opens up a new frontier: of investigating the online relationships *within* and *between* organisations and their evolution over time. To understand local and national organisations within the same denomination, historians have often examined the ways in which formal hierarchical relations between individual local congregations and the superstructure of their denomination have functioned, and how information, people and funds have circulated around the different parts of the structure (for an example of this kind of institutional history, see Chandler, 2006). The archived Web now offers the means to reconstruct the ‘Web sphere’ of each individual denomination: how individual congregations are connected to each other in a particular locality, within larger geographic units, and with other nodes in larger national and international denominational networks that transcend locality (see Webster, 2018a; on the notion of a ‘Web sphere’, see Brügger, 2010).

A related theme in the religious history of the twentieth century amongst the Christian churches was the great hopes invested in co-operation, and indeed potential reunion, between the different denominations, reversing the great schisms of the Reformation period. Such questions were traditionally studied in terms of high-level diplomatic contact between denominations – the formulation of statements and the holding of conferences – but also in the face-to-face contact between Christians in particular localities (Power, 2007; Webster, 2015a: 21–48). The archived Web offers the opportunity to observe those ecumenical contacts within religious traditions – international, national and local – as they are replicated on or transferred to the Web.

Religious Practice

Of the four aspects of religion under examination here, perhaps the most attention from scholars of the Web has been paid to *practice*: what is it that religious people *do* when being religious online? Much of this work has been implicitly and explicitly ethnographic and indeed anthropological in approach, observing, as it were, the behaviour of an isolated tribe. This approach has its counterpart in offline research, such as the method employed by James Steven to investigate worship amongst English charismatic Christians (Steven, 2002: 42–54). Using a combination of participant observation and interviews, scholars have examined several different kinds of religious activities transferred to online spaces. Obvious continuities may be observed, such as those between the television or radio broadcasting of worship (a feature of British life from the 1920s onwards) and live webcasting of the same. One of the earliest studies examined charismatic Christians ‘meeting’ in small groups for communal prayer in a virtual reality environment, a direct transference of a common practice into a new space (Schroeder et al., 1998). Becker (2011) examined the dynamics of Islamic rituals such as the *shahada*, or conversion ritual, in Dutch and German chatrooms. Particularly counter-intuitive, it might seem, has been the migration of pilgrimage online – a form of religious observance which traditionally drew its very validity from the sacrifices involved in physically travelling to a particular place. One example of cyber-pilgrimage is that to Croagh Patrick in the Republic of Ireland (in the Roman Catholic tradition), but many others could be mentioned (MacWilliams, 2004).

From the point of view of the historian, much of the discussion of the ‘success’ of such transference of offline activity to online is beside the point. Whether or not such transferred rituals fulfil the criteria for a valid and effectual religious observance must remain a question for theologians and liturgists. However, specific historical attention has turned towards changing expectations of what constitutes an ‘authentic’ religious experience (a related but different question to that of validity), and how the Christian churches in particular have

responded to this perceived demand (Garnett et al., 2006). Prayer, corporate worship, pilgrimage, particular buildings and religious ‘events’ such as festivals all come into focus under this rubric, with a sharpened emphasis on the aesthetic and communal aspects of shared experience in a particular place. To what extent have both worshippers and religious organisations recognised online ritual as ‘authentic’, if the recent historical trend has been towards greater emphasis on physical presence?

As such online ritual comes into historical focus, the questions will rather be to do with how widespread these practices were, and how many believers engaged in them, as a proportion of the faith community as a whole. Did such rituals attract those who were not already habitually engaged in worship in a physical location? How did participants understand what they were doing, and how it related to their offline worship or pilgrimage? As such, a methodological shift will be required. The archived traces of the online rituals themselves offer some evidence. Whatever textual traces of comment from participants that have been preserved will also be key, as will the contemporary investigations made by sociologists of religion and others. However, sustained oral history investigation will be essential to understand how and why people did so participate, and what they took from their participation. Direct engagement with site owners will also be required to secure access to statistics relating to usage. Offline published commentary and interview evidence from religious leaders and others will also be key to understanding the attitudes of religious professionals to these various migrations of practice online: were they a disruption, or an opportunity, or both?

Religions and the Other

Perhaps the most significant area in which the Internet has not simply provided spaces for the replication of existing religious activity, but allowed new kinds of activity, is in the contact between individual religious people of different faiths and with those who profess no religion. Before the Web, when examined internationally, the study of these interactions was necessarily confined to the high-level summitry between official representatives of religions,

since these were by and large the only channels available for such contact (Webster, 2015b). It was also possible to study the representation of minority faiths in print and in mainstream media, but given their broadcast nature, to recover the reception of and reactions to those representations was relatively difficult. To recreate the contact between individuals of different faiths and none was a task of very detailed local and oral history; rarely did a local encounter leave a significant documentary trace (one exception is documented by Maiden, 2015).

The Web in general, and social media in particular, have afforded the opportunity for individuals to engage directly with others, either as a means of fostering greater understanding or in a more antagonistic mode. There has been relatively little scholarly attention paid to this so far, perhaps because the contacts between individuals of opposed views are harder to identify in the mass than are communities of the like-minded. However, the work of Stephen Pihlaja on Christian-atheist antagonism on YouTube suggests a fruitful approach to the small-scale interactions of individuals, which might be replicated using archived blog comment threads and other discussion fora (Pihlaja, 2016).

We noted above the opportunity to begin to investigate the growth and change of religious organisations as reflected in the archived Web. Another particular opportunity for scholars that the archived Web affords is understanding the way in which religious organisations, large and small (as distinct from individuals) have interacted online with other organisations,. The recent study by Ackland and Evans (2017) on the debate over abortion in Australia is instructive, using data from the live Web collected in 2005 and 2015 to reconstruct the network of pro-life and pro-choice sites and to analyse the terms in which the issue was discussed. Webster (2017a) also provided a case study of how the imprint of one religious leader's site in the link structures of the UK Web changed as a result of a single controversial public statement. Such studies point the way towards longitudinal analyses of evolving debates over social issues in which religious organisations play only a part.

As well as public online encounters between religious people and those who are not, religious historians studying the Web will need also to attend directly to anti-religious groups and the ways in which they have attempted to influence the shape of public discourse about religion. Although they are by no means identical, the phenomena of racism, xenophobia, anti-religious sentiment and far-right politics overlap, and the far-right was early to adopt the Internet as a means of internal communication and outward dissemination (Halavais, 2010). Episodes such as the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in Denmark in 2005 or the film *The Innocence of Muslims* are objects of historical study not only for the reactions from those whose sensibilities were offended, but for understanding the support amongst the anti-religious for them (al-Rawi, 2016; Khan, 2015).

Conclusion

The ‘Great Commission’ given by Jesus Christ was to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’, and most (although not all) of the world religious traditions have been proselytic in their aims. In this, we see both another spur to historical investigation and a reminder of the limits of Web history. Certainly, some of the materials of such evangelism have been made available online: sacred texts and expositions of them, and live broadcasts of worship and the preaching that is often embedded within it. The online text has its counterpart in the printed tract so widely distributed by Christian evangelists in earlier periods: the online sermon is prefigured by the televangelist of the 1970s, or the street corner preacher before him. However, whilst the call to conversion may be studied online, the response is much less easily recovered, which perhaps explains the relative lack of emphasis on this in the research to date. The stories of Christian conversion that have survived tend to stress the quietness and the inwardness of the process by which people come to adopt a position of faith; processes which tend to leave no trace whatever at the time, and are often only recorded much later. (On the exceptionally well-documented but yet still complex case of C.S. Lewis, see McGrath, 2013: 131–59). In closing, then, this chapter suggests that to write the history of proselytisation and response in the early twenty-first century requires not only the study of the Web, but also an

integration of both the live and archived Web with the full range of other primary sources that are the raw material of historical writing: personal testimonies of both evangelist and convert; the experience of the local congregations into which the converted pass; changing institutional strategies and the growth and decline of membership overall. Such an investigation is complex, and the sources often incomplete, but the achievement of such an integration would mark the point at which Web history had become part of history as a whole.

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