Discursively Integrating Church and State: Charitable Choice and Welfare Reform

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The establishment of official religions by colonial and state governments was one of the earliest concerns of American legal scholars. In the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the authors explicitly attempted to rescind provisions for a state religion by denying the government power for its funding with what some constitutional scholars believe was the intention to avoid preferencing either a particular religion or even religion itself. This "establishment clause" has been interpreted in a variety of ways. In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed a law allowing "faith-based charitable groups" to compete with civic organizations for funds. In the years since this legislation was enacted, discourse surrounding the entire issue of religion in society and the role of the state versus that of religion has undergone a distinct change. This paper discusses the problems of language and ideology surrounding this issue and examines specific examples from the media concerning faith-based discourse in an attempt to gauge the extent of possible ideological outcomes on what has been called "welfare reform."

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion....
(First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights; 1791)

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There is established a White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (White House OFBCI) within the Executive Office of the President that will have lead responsibility in the executive branch to establish policies, priorities, and objectives.... (Establishment of White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, Section 2, January 29, 2001)

Text Analysis

The above two quotes provide an intimation of the broad range of interpretation legal documents typically allow. Constructed to avoid alternate or conflicting readings, documents such as these highlight the inherent linguistic nature of the legal profession in its attempt to formalize and codify language. Legal authors generally make the assumption that the more precise and technical the language used, the better the chances of their intentions being "correctly" interpreted. In this sense, language is viewed much like a television signal with a transmitter on one end and a receiver at the other. Comparing language to the workings of a mode of transmission assumes, as Harris notes, that language functions like a "cond uit" through which "thoughts are transferred from one person to another." (1981;11).

Contentious political struggles over the precise wordings of legislation attest to the importance attributed to language and its potential for "misinterpretation." Yet it is generally assumed that one of the very functions of the legal profession is to ferret out the multiple meanings in the language it constructs. The fact that identical passages from constitutional amendments are often used to bolster the arguments of different political factions points to the fluidity of not only the language as it is used but of the very nature of language itself. Legal scholars note that although documents are sometimes written precisely in order to permit a variety of interpretation, some of the most hotly contested laws are those which appear initially to permit a minimum of ambivalence. To note this is

also to suggest that while texts are themselves necessarily produced from specific ideological viewpoints and may be intended to illicit particular views from readers, there is an openness to interpretation inherent in the language. Both legal interpretation and literary criticism are based on this indeterminacy of meaning. If legal language is open to this imprecision, how much more so is other supposedly less codified language?

Having suggested this, one must hasten to add that texts also exhibit discernible traces of the conditions of their production, which can and do serve as clues to understanding social and institutional contexts. It is important to note at the outset that textual analysis, performed outside of such context, risks becoming a purely relativist and idealist endeavor. While there is certainly an element of truth in Hall's contention that nothing "meaningful" exists outside of discourse (1994), the circumstances of production and circulation are undeniably tangible phenomena. Yet the ways people mentally systematize these phenomena are, as Paul Chilton observes, as much a function of "the minds of their makers and users" as the phenomena themselves (1994; 50).

In sum, textual analysis involves two seemingly disparate yet closely related ideas. Any meaningful conclusions we make about society are necessarily mediated through text (in a multisemiotic sense including all sign systems). Yet in order to fully understand a text, it is necessary to take into consideration extra-textual factors concerning production, distribution, and a larger societal context. Viewed in isolation, a text may be said to produce a multitude of meanings at different times from different points of interpretation. Still what might be referred to as conventional discoursal practices within various institutional formations must be located and judged from specific historical viewpoints.

Just as legal documentation produces its own linguistic conventions, so too does the language used in various other institutional settings. The print media is a prime example of this institutional use of language in which various conventions are

used to organize texts so that, again in Chilton's words, "existing language is processed, subjected to numerous semantic readjustments, and fed back to the population...." (1988; 53). It is the linguistic devices of that medium which I have chosen to examine in this paper.

Critical discourse analysis

Before going into the specifics of the current study, I feel it is important to understand the general framework within which discourse analysis is possible. Textual analysis done from a strict sociological or content analytical perspective has traditionally concentrated less on linguistic elements and more on what Halliday refers to as "ideational" features (1994). While beneficial from one point of view, this perspective discounts the indeterminacy of language noted above regarding language as a supposed neutral vehicle of transmission and largely bypassing discussion of how texts are constructed.

Strict linguistic analysis, on the other hand, has disregarded historical accountings of the discoursal features of production and consumption of the texts involved. Sociolinguistic analysis has often attempted to consider these conditions and has come closer to integrating both linguistic and economic factors, yet it often regards social "strata" as static and frequently concludes with simple (which is not to say uncomplicated) descriptions of linguistic conditions.

Critical discourse analysis attempts to integrate both linguistic and sociohistorical analysis and provides a framework for the dialectical interplay of social and textual features. I have conducted the current study employing elements of the critical discourse analytical model most closely associated with Fairclough (1995). The framework might be conceptualized as a series of concentric circles, the outermost representing the broadest socioeconomic patterns in which production is carried on. Within this are the discoursal conditions of production themselves, those particular social and institutional determinants which shape textual features. Finally, the innermost circle represents the text itself, the specific discoursal and

linguistic patterns which make up a piece (for our purposes) of news writing. A principled textual sampling, it is felt, needs to provide an account of the interrelationships between these different levels of context.

Socioeconomic context

As noted, the context from which production arises inevitably inscribes specific traces on the surface of media texts, and if we hope to better understand these texts, they must be read in consideration of such contexts. Hence, we might note that the globalizing effects of media expansion have been instrumental in consolidating a broad capitalist paradigm ensuring that the context within which media texts are produced is increasingly susceptible to the pressures of corporate profit and commercialization. As many media researchers have noted, commercial media stand out among the most active and profitable transnational markets. The global media market, according to McChesney, now "more closely resembles a cartel than it does the competitive marketplace found in economics textbooks" (2001). Journalists work more and more within the constraints of a highly commercialized media marketplace which emphasizes value on profit above most other traditional journalistic values.

Since the ultimate market function of the commercial print media (and with others) is to interest advertisers in their readership, thus ensuring profitability for investors, we might naturally expect journalistic practices both to follow social and market trends and to focus on how, if not to increase circulation, at least not to lose customers. Common-sense business approaches determine that proper attention and respect to what are deemed "core" social values (family, nation, god) will guarantee rough consent among readers and advertisers as to a newspaper's worth. Media companies wellunderstand the parameters within which they can work regarding these subjects, and it becomes news itself when, in response to an article, readers voice strong complaints, a reporter is chastised, or a company pulls its advertising.

Institutional context

Within this larger context is the framework in which journalists produce specific pieces of writing. The marketplace values mentioned above, which have come to dominate much of mainstream journalism, play a major role in the types of everyday decisions that are made for and by journalists and which end up affecting their writing. Constraints on time in order to meet deadlines, determinations concerning concision, whether subject matter is new or interesting, or appeals to certain demographics are all determinants which affect the news value of a piece of journalism less in terms of how it informs the public but more in terms of its commercial value. Commercial aspects of production have gradually shifted both the focus of news stories and the shape and texture of texts themselves. In the words of Jacob Mey, "by insisting on newness, freshness, continuity, etc. the functional language of the news causes 'society-blindness'" (1985; 317). Larger issues concern who is allowed to write, what subjects are appropriate or taboo, and what actually gets published.

At issue in this paper are the ways that journalists employ different textual information in order to produce a new text. Given that all news reports, stories, or even opinion or editorial pieces are based in some sense on previously published material, there are a variety of ways that this subject matter can be incorporated (or deleted) from the new text. This "intertextual" feature (see Fairclough, 1995) is a rich source for the discovery of larger social influences.

Textual context

Finally, the actual piece of writing is itself a context in the sense that specific linguistic features and discoursal patterns are applied in various ways cohesively, syntactically, and as they are modified in numerous instances intertextually and by their immediate surroundings. As we are so consistently reminded of the instrumental function of the media in shaping and maintaining democratic institutions, it seems equally vital

to stress the nature of society's pervasive influence on the media—in this case, media texts. As Mey puts it:

> This is precisely where society comes in. In a sense, the language we use is always a 'used' language. My own language, at this very moment of writing this, reflects the ways many other members of the linguistic community have used the language, and are using it. If my experiences become 'wor dable', and wordable for me, the reason is that others have worded theirs before me. (1985;172)

Since part of the basis of this paper is to actually analyze a piece of text, I will leave further description of textual means to that section. But before going on, I will offer the following as a brief illustration of how the process described translates into an actual text in the press.

One of George W. Bush's first acts as president was to reinstate a rule (lifted during the previous administration) denying U.S. family-planning aid (contraceptives, maternal care, etc.) to organizations in developing countries which also offered abortions—even if those services were funded through separate non-U.S. sources. In remarks to the U.S. Agency for International Development, Bush mischaracterized American-sponsored family-planning aid by noting, "It is my conviction that taxpayer funds should not be used to pay for abortions or advocate or actively promote abortion." Although Senate conservatives had passed an amendment in 1973 preventing U.S. aid for such purposes, newspapers around the country interpreted Bush's words in numerous front-page articles with headlines such as "Bush Halts Funding Used for Abortions" (*Houston Chronicle*, 1/23/01).

The three contexts specified above can readily be identified here. Textual elements within the headline itself provide a basis from which we might begin. Firstly, we can note that the active mode of this sentence contrasts with the tenuous nature of the earlier Bush quote ("It is my conviction that..."). If we ask what in this sentence the agent (Bush) has actually

affected, we find a nominal "funding," which we might infer was derived from "taxpayer's money," although as a verb form "funding" possesses a considerably more active character. We assume that something will be funded, and the object of by the verb is determined to be "abortions." The text, therefore, is influenced not only by its linguistic surroundings but by conditions of the news writer which encourage active, urgent, timely, and thus newsworthy articles—institutional determinants which affect all journalistic products.

Lastly, the writer did not produce this piece outside of the larger social and economic climate. Just as Bush is influenced by political and religious issues of the time, so are the journalists who mediate these views. And it is that particular context to which I now turn.

"Charitable choice"

The 1996 Welfare Reform Bill contained several provisions for so-called "charitable choice" which would allow non-governmental groups to compete for certain funding with government and civic organizations. Although new in character, this movement had various legal precedents. In the 1930s Protestant churches in Louisiana had brought suit against the Catholic church for its use of public funds for school textbooks (Cochran vs Louisiana School Board). This was followed by a ruling in the U.S. Supreme Courts allowing Catholic families to use public funding for children to ride buses to school (Everson vs. Ewing Township, 1947). Both of these cases were argued on the basis that the parochial schools did not benefit directly from federal funds but rather that children themselves were the beneficiaries.

These rulings were followed in the 1960s and 1970s by legislation in several states granting funds to private religious schools and universities on the "child benefit" basis. Bolstered by these earlier rulings, then Texas State Governor George W. Bush initiated a number of "charitable choice" programs in his own state of Texas which encouraged many on the Christian right to push for his run for the president's office.

Leading up to Bush's election campaign in 1999, conservative Republicans along with members of the Christian coalition and various anti-abortion groups found common cause in an effort to promote a strong presidential candidate who would focus on moral issues. One of the principal guides for the movement was a book by University of Texas journalism professor Marvin Olasky entitled *Compassionate Conservatism*. This and other texts served as handbooks for the religious right on how to win a cultural war against what was commonly referred to as "liberal secularism." Encouraged by the bold and uncompromising tone of this religious rhetoric, conservatives in the Congress succeeded in adding provisions to the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill which would strengthen the powers of religious groups to obtain and use public funds.

In addition to these specifically religious initiatives, the Clinton administration, along with the Republican-dominated Congress, had spent the past eight years attempting to dismantle the social welfare system, demonize "big government," and "take the shackles off" private industry. A distinction frequently offered between Republican and Democratic parties in the United States is the role emotion has to play in debates on economic matters. In this context, core Republican party values have centered around Social Darwinist views that one either sink or swim and that efforts by government to assist individuals only result in dragging others down to a plane of moral and economic commonality distinguished principally by the absence of human spirit or individuality.

The strong-willed but sometimes mean-spirited image of the Republican party is generally contrasted with the softer liberalism of the Democrats—in essence a less drastic version of the same Social Darwinist principles. Nevertheless, since many Democrats have counted as their constituents women, minorities, and labor unionists, they have felt to a greater extent obliged to draw back from the harsher limits of a strict application of this philosophy.

Many in the Republican party had grudgingly witnessed the continuing popular support of Bill Clinton due to what some

attributed to his sensitivity and human touch. In contrast, the Republicans were viewed as the attack dogs of the past decade with their unceasing personal assaults on the Democratic president's sexual morality and his party's fiscal policies. In much of the public mind, or so some Republicans felt, their party was suffering from an image problem. When the Welfare Reform Bill of 1996 saw Republicans arguing for even further cuts in social benefits, the rhetoric of "compassionate conservatism" began to find its way into the handbooks of Republican campaign managers around the country. What many had viewed until then as a cold, unabashed conservatism was now modified by a warm and more caring adjective.

It is within this changing context of growing religious fervor, heightened economic struggle, and political maneuvering that the debates on welfare reform have played out and in which the discourse on faith-based initiatives are best understood.

Textual Sample

I have chosen for analysis two texts from separate major commercial newspapers; one a short editorial from the *Boston Herald* (BH, April 14, 2001), the second a longer article from the *New York Times* (NYT, April 11, 2001). The distinction between these two news sources deserves some commentary, since it bears directly on the institutional context in which the texts are produced.

Often referred to as the newspaper of record, the *New York Times* is the flagship of the media conglomerate the New York Times Co. It publishes 35 different newspapers around the United States, owns five TV stations, two radio stations, and several magazines (*Family Circle*, *Golf Digest*, and *Tennis*). The Times has a 33% interest in the *International Herald Tribune* and controlling interests in four different paper mills. It is one of few remaining "family-owned" media companies in the United States, and although business practices became more market-oriented during the 1970s, it retains a reputation, some say

undeserved, as a "liberal" journal appealing to an urban, secular, and, in New York state, a readership which frequently votes Democratic.

By contrast, the *Boston Herald* is a smaller local tabloid whose previous owner—the aggressively conservative media baron Rupert Murdoch—appears to have exerted some lasting influences on the paper. One critic has noted that previous editors from other Murdoch papers had left a legacy of "styles and influences that still resonate in the newsroom and the community" (Reason, 1997). The paper has been called sensationalistic due to its screaming headlines and frequent comic word play, although recent reports describe it as a "more-than-respectable number-two paper that's especially strong on city news, politics, and sports" (*Boston Phoenix*, 1998). The *Herald*'s readership is generally inner city, somewhat more conservative, and more blue-collar that of the *New York Times*.

Both news articles are reports based on a March 5–18 poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life concerning religion and society. Since the NYT article is over twice the length of the BH editorial and, unlike the latter, contains direct quotations and considerably more commentary, I have focused exclusively on the sections of each text devoted to interpretation of the poll results.

Immediately noticeable are the distinctions apparent in the two headlines. Whereas the NYT article emphasizes that "Support for Religion-Based Plan Is Hedged" (foregrounding support), the BH editorial chooses to lead with "Faith-based effort gets wide support." The agent in the first case (support) is somewhat weakened by the simple relational aspect of the verb in comparison with the agent of the BH piece (effort), which more actively "gets" support. The predicate (hedged) in the NYT article connotes a tenuousness which further appears to compliment the weak nature of the verb in this case.

Lexical differences between the two headlines are worth noting as well. The BH editorial employs the phrase "faith-based" in several places. Since the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill was passed, this phrase has become commonplace in the news,

popularized largely by religious conservatives and the new charitable choice provisions. In contrast, the NYT article notes support for a "Religion-Based" plan, a term that might be characterized as more neutral, or, conversely, in the present context, as attempting to focus attention on the plan's injection of religiosity into what some might regard as an otherwise "secular" matter.

Turning to the body of the texts, the initial paragraph of the BH editorial clearly illustrates the point that, although the different authors of these pieces serve as mediators of the same report at essentially the same period in roughly similar media, it is the presumably "transparent" medium of the language employed which, in fact, connotes differences in meaning. A look at the paragraphs below leads one to question what might be a reasonable interpretation of the actual poll data.

> Americans like the idea of giving government money to religious groups that provide social services but only if those groups are Christian or Jewish, do not proselytize the poor and do not use religious guidelines in deciding whom to hire, a poll released yesterday found. (NYT)

> A new poll shows strong support for President George W. Bush's proposal for government funding of the work of faith-based charities. But it also indicates that there are reservations which need to be addressed. (BH)

The simple syntactic structure of each sentence (NP+V+NP) illustrates how in the NYT article it is "Americans" who are the agent expressing an opinion toward "the idea of giving m oney." In contrast, the BH editorial has the noun phrase "A new poll" as the agent showing "strong support for President Bush's proposal...." The BH editorial has the poll in its entirety replacing the single opinion of a group of Americans on this one issue.

The NYT article goes on to further hedge the approval of Americans through the use of the oppositional conjunction

"but," noting responses to the Pew questionnaire which pertain specifically to conditions under which people would agree to the use of government money (for Christians or Jews, not for proselytizing, etc.) This larger process of conditionality (if A, then B) is compressed in the BH editorial with the nominalization "reservations" (an actual quote from the executive summary of the report, although, we should note, not attributed).

Failure in these cases to attribute agency and define conditionality suggest an ideological usage of language which also reveals itself in the different conclusions the two texts draw from the poll data. Further instances add to this impression. The author of the NYT article determines that "The results indicate that while Americans favor the principle behind Mr. Bush's initiative, they oppose many of the details." Note that the proposition might have been stated in the inverse as "The results indicate that while Americans oppose many of the details, they favor the principle behind Mr. Bush's initiative," with the verb "oppose" in the weaker subordinate clause serving to play down rather than foreground the notion that people might actually oppose the initiative. Instead, as we see, the author chooses to represent the poll results in a way that presents at best a conflicting view of people's opinions on the subject. In contrast, the BH editorial author notes little ambivalence in the poll results, reiterating the belief that they are a clear endorsement for the Bush plan and assuring readers that "Such broad-based support should hearten proponents of the initiative."

A central issue of the debate over the public funding of religious groups concerns the proselytizing of recipients of assistance. Of interest in the two accounts are the different means employed to dispel or enhance this notion. The two examples below illustrate this point.

> And two-thirds expressed concern that churches might require religious participation by recipients of their charity. (BH)

> But among those polled, 60 percent said they were concerned that religious social-service programs would force the people they serve to participate in religious practices. (NYT)

The actual wording on the Pew questionnaire asks whether "it is a concern" of the respondents that "the people who receive these services might be forced to take part in religious practices." Notice that the concern expressed by the pollees in the NYT article ("they were concerned") is a verbalized form of the original wording, whereas the BH editorial employs the same nominalized form used in the questionnaire ("concern"). In this sense, the NYT example might be said to carry a more active implication of people's concern.

Note also how modalization is employed here. "Might" ("the churches might require") is used in the BH editorial to temper the concern expressed. We might infer by this that the respondents' concern is judged as not wholly valid, since it involves an uncertain conditional future. This is in contrast with the use in the NYT article of the more definite modal "would" ("programs would force"), implying a level of certainty and thus validating, to some extent, the respondents' concerns.

How conclusions are drawn regarding the interpretation of the poll data appears to strengthen the argument that language is being systematically employed here in an ideological fashion. In response to the reservations expressed by pollees concerning being forced to participate in religious activities, the BH editorial notes:

> The last objection is easiest to answer. Money will go to charitable work, not to proselytizing or other sectarian activities. Churches that made religious participation a requirement for receiving help would soon find themselves cut off from federal subsidies.

What was initially a diffused "concern" in the poll question-

naire is transformed here into a specific "objection." We might regard the causes for and allaying of a "concern," with its emotive connotations, as a rather more complex subject than those pertaining to a more rationally-based "objection." We are less likely to ask about a "specific concern," for example, than "What is it specifically that you object to?" Thus transformed, the objection provides the focus for a simple answer—which the editorial offers in the next sentence. "Money will go to charitable work, not proselytizing...," it is noted, in what is presumed to be a self-explanatory statement. That this charitable work may indeed involve proselytizing is not contemplated. Notice, too, that the use of the definite modal ("money will go"), stating the certainty of the fact, is in fact made possible by the preceding construction of what in essence is a question to be answered.

Welfare Reform Discourse

In the above examples I have attempted to illustrate how linguistic and intertextual analysis can help point to ways that language is used ideologically. Although these analyses in themselves may be said to demonstrate little, together with a larger social analysis they can provide a fuller understanding of how ideology functions to ensure the continual recreation of social formations. The data reported in the two texts, although from a single source, appear to have been interpreted in dramatically different fashions and result in starkly opposite conclusions. One can therefore reasonably expect a reader of the *Boston Herald* editorial to understand the poll results as having wide support among Americans, and a *New York Times* reader to have a mixed reaction. The point is not that writers interpret data and events differently (they necessarily do so) but that they employ discoursal and linguistic elements in different ways and that social and institutional influences are instantiated in the texts they produce.

The rhetoric of charitable choice has proven unusually

functional for those hoping to promote a version of government more responsive to the needs of transnational capital. The increasing shift in focus of social responsibility for common citizens that has come about over the past 25 years has included deregulation of business, cutting of government services, and a redistribution of the burden of taxation onto the middle class and the poor. Hoping to bolster the American Social Darwinist tradition, many in the U.S. Congress (most notably Republican party leaders, but many Democrats as well) demand that wages be kept down, a cheap labor force be maintained, corporate taxes be reduced, and government subsidies to business be maintained. If for no other reason than its usefulness in understanding how to rechannel government funds into the private sector, charitable choice has received a sympathetic hearing among many wealthy opinion makers. The "compassion" of Marvin Olasky's *Compassionate Conservatism* can, if not in intent at least in its ultimate function, be interpreted as meaning a gutting of government programs in order to provide the market with the excess labor sufficient to manage costs. As many have noted, this is a prime function of the private charity system.

Insofar as the *Boston Herald* editorial expresses less dissonance toward notions of charitable choice, serving in many ways to naturalize this discourse through lexical and modal usage, we might regard it as employing language ideologically to a greater degree than the NYT article and thus serving to reinforce and normalize these ideas among its readership.

Conclusion

I have attempted in this study to demonstrate the effects of social and institutional influences on textual material through an analysis of media texts. Although texts may be interpreted in widely different ways in absence of these influences, no truly accurate account can be arrived at without imbedding a text within its historical framework. To this end a critical

analytical analysis provides not only this framework but a dialectical view in which we can see the effects of production and distribution on texts and, inversely, the effects of texts on these social processes as well.

Striking among the features in the *Boston Herald* text is its summoning of discoursal patterns and linguistic elements to demonstrate clear support for the Bush plan regarding faith-based initiatives. We might regard the ramifications of such support as a self-fulfilling prophecy with social cause and textual effects bound up in a vicious cycle in much the same way as governmental neglect and social ills have arisen over the years. In its failure to provide the necessary social infrastructure, government essentially forces citizens to accept the only available services offered—those offered by churches—which, it should be noted, have by and large always been supplemented by government funds. In doing so, the government abandons not only its social function but also its professed commitment to the establishment clause of the constitution.

The larger outcome of having government welfare funds siphoned off to private organizations, and one from which attention has been distracted, concerns the devolving of the government itself—a separate, but clearly related motive of many conservative members of both parties of Congress and, needless to say, of corporations in general.

The establishment clause has had two different outcomes: (1) It has denied any one religion a monopoly position with respect to government assistance (although non-Christian faiths benefit proportionally very little while others, such as National Catholic Charities, derive roughly half of their budgets from federal assistance); and (2) it has forced the government to respond to social welfare conditions in its own right from outside the purview of the church.

What recent legislation has done is to gradually chip away at the second function of this clause while encouraging the government to continue and perhaps increase its funding of churches. Since many religious advocates prefer to focus attention solely on the first function listed here, many in society fail

to perceive the threat posed to public control of government by the discourse of charitable choice and faith-based initiatives.

Although I have attempted to distinguish between ideological uses in the two media texts discussed, it is still worth noting that neither the texts nor the Pew survey make reference to possible economic or political motivations behind the charitable choice legislation. As a result, those whose interests lie in building and broadening a democratic public sphere by not preferencing religion are effectively ignored. Textual analysis is one means of reintroducing the historical setting through which this might be better understood.

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