

Unit 1

Religion – Sociological Perspectives

Contents

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Scope of Religion
- 1.3 Process of Knowledge
- 1.4 Study of Totems
- 1.5 The Secular Approaches
- 1.6 Economy and Religion
- 1.7 The Rise of Capitalism
- 1.8 Gods and Goddesses
- 1.9 Ethnographic Accounts
- 1.10 Conclusion
- 1.11 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After studying the unit you should be able to:

- define the scope of religion;
- discuss the study of totems;
- describe economy and its relation with religion; and
- outline the rise of capitalism.

1.1 Introduction

We have to get used to the idea that human societies have a long history, and the word sociology appeared only in the first half of the nineteenth century. Religion is as old as human societies have been in some form or the other; and human beings have reflected on the nature of religion for thousands of years. Man's quest for understanding nature and its forces with effects on his pursuits both in the positive and negative dimensions have been a part of his ways of feeling, thinking and acting for centuries. These have been worked upon elaborately and processes of religious practices developed in various forms. The great religions of the World had their beginnings in Asia and the part now included in Israel, China had its own variety. Such religions have their written texts, commentaries and rituals. These are parts of great civilizations. In addition non-literate peoples too had their own world view, defining the known and the unknown, and ways of dealing with them. In our school exercises in algebra, we used equations, and to know the relations among quantities not known definitely. We used to say, let this be X. The Value of X could vary with each specific calculation. If X is the age of the husband and wife is four years younger than the husband, and if the wife is of the age 25 years, then find the value of X can be posed as a question. Now it is easy to find the value of X, in this case 29 years. If the wife be 50 years of age, the value of X would then be $50+4=54$ years. Thus human mind is busy finding the value of the unknown. That is of X. One of the anthropologists used this mode

of expression for understanding the nature of religion. He said it consists of X raised to the power of infinity, or X^∞ ; that is the unknown raised to the power of non-decipherable value. That is the idea of God, and the Hindu texts say that none can ever fully grasp His qualities. Krishna had to reveal the self to Arjuna, and that too when Arjuna's eyes had been given special treatment to able to see the glare of 'the thousand suns'. All texts describe the Supreme Being as unknowable; and the pursuit for trying to understand Him as unending 'Neti Neti' "(or ever lasting)" 'Charaiveti Charaiveti'. Religion has a metaphysical base, what is true in it or what is its correct rendering or meaning are things that are discussed endlessly in religious discourses round the globe. What then Sociology, a subject of merely a century and three quarters in origin has to say on religion? Sociological understanding of religion takes two paths; (1) using the writings and explanations of religion given in the texts and practices of peoples by earlier writers as data, and (2) developing a perspective or a set of perspectives for understanding the central interest of sociological inquiries viz., the role of the religion in generating cooperation and conflict in society. Our effort is to acquire a minimum acquaintance of the institution and the process; the idea and practice of religion as a first step. In the second we use this information and relate it to social units, their interactions and consequences. Sociologists of religion do not become experts on religion; its intricacies and correctness of explanations belong to the activities that are covered under a different head. Theology, Sociology of religion can be practiced by sociologists belonging to any faith, or even no faith. In fact the most famous of the sociologists of religion thought of himself as an agnostic. We refer to Emile Durkheim of France. Sometimes this happens for other branches of studies too. The most well known writer on History of Human Marriages, Westermarck, to quote a classroom remark of Kingsley Davis, 'wrote on marriage throughout his life, and remained a bachelor throughout his life'. Hence, briefly again; sociology of religion, is not so much a study of religion, as it is about religion. It is a study of sociology and no religious expertise may be claimed for its practitioners or students. In this sense it is a secular enterprise. A proper understanding of it involves studying the relationship of society and religion in several societies and religions. Hence, in this course a familiarity with a number of religions will be acquired so that sociological processes could be studied under different situations. India having a multiplicity of religions provides additional scope for encompassing this variety almost ready at hand; but the contributions to the understanding of religion and society come from all parts of the world, and abstractions and theories arising from the same will be discussed throughout this course.

Here are a few statements: Identify which belong to the area of study of religion and which to Sociology of Religion:

- 1) Islam incorporates in itself teachings of the past Saints and faiths.
- 2) The Shia constitute the majority in the state of Iran.
- 3) Atman and Parmatama are in essence one.
- 4) Gurudwara is an important institution for guiding and organising collective activities among the Sikh.
- 5) The priest declares a youngman and woman to live as husband and wife after the ceremony.
- 6) The Catholic have a lower rate of suicide than the Protestant.

(Statements: 1, 3 and 5 belong to Religion: 2, 4 and 6 to Sociology of Religion).

1.2 The Scope of Religion

Religion as a social force exerted influence in both the preliterate and literate societies. Its teachings and modes of worship got wide spread source of the early ways of remembering them consisted of hymns and poetic expressions that could be sung, at times in groups. These made religious performances attractive. A few story tellers could produce some dramatic effects in and through the *Hari Katha*. The devotional compositions of Nanak and Kabir were used to good effect. The ancient period had its *Shruti* and *Smriti* tradition. Life was nearer nature. Nature and its elemental forces become subject matter of these compositions, the Greeks and the Indian Thinkers even conferred divinity on nature. Groups of people began to identify themselves with the Sun, the Moon, and Fire as the *Kshatriya* lineages identified their ancestry. Among the tribals there were references to animals, like the Crow, the Eagle, the Kangaroo; in India, people used totemic connections with the Snake (*Nag*), Lion (*Singh*), deer (*Hiran*) etc. The totem represented the clan, or embodied its spirit. Water, air, earth, and fire were raised to that status, as also places like river, hills and mountains. So we have a *Kailash Parvat*, the sacred *Ganga*, and lakes with pious connections. In praise of these places, numerous songs and stories have come about. The great epics of India are described in various forms as the story of the Rama or Krishna; with ideas of good and evil, of gentleness and cruelty, of saints and devils expressed dramatically. Books embodying the quintessence of devotion and glory of God are composed in great literary styles. Almost everything worth knowing, preserving and being passed on from generation to generation seems to carry a religious flavour. Even discussions among the best of minds revolve round the true meaning and import of the text. Not surprising therefore the first formal schools took the form of mission schools, *madarsas*, or *ashrams* seminaries, and the intellectuals dealing with various forms of knowledge and its application come from such centres. Remembered knowledge, written and later published texts come into vogue. In and through these institutions developed grammar of various languages styles of expression, methods of reasoning and elements of scientific pursuits. In a sense for the early man both pre literate and literate, things worth knowing about man and nature and the supernatural all combined into the broad sphere of religious enterprise, if one may use that phrase. In this sense also got described various social strata of society, the sense of public duties, and time place and persons got those associations. Religion was all pervasive, may the soul of society as Durkheim put it. Participation in collective activities generated a sense of group solidarity and a force different from unconnected actions.

1.3 Process of Knowledge

The process of knowledge as also of life began to develop along various dimensions with increasing division of labour and specialisations. We are all aware of the same in technical and technological matters; their multiplicity into academic pursuits dealing with diverse disciplines, branches, and sub-branches. Now religion is no longer the overarching feature of knowledge. It is possible for institutes of higher learning and technical skills to grow beyond the missionary fold. When this happens, religion itself becomes a specialised activity, so does its teaching and practice. Scientific growth in modern times got a fresh start with a series of discoveries by Newton, the law of gravity, laws of motion, and light are well known; and a scientific journal *Nature* appeared informing the scientists and general readers of the latest discoveries. The old saying

God said : "Let there be light, and there was light". was replaced by a statement that marked the top quote on the publication God said : "Let Newton be and all will be light" In humanities and philosophy there was a movement beginning with Renaissance two centuries earlier. In painting and art human figures could be depicted in their natural forms, common man become the subject matter of discourse. Divinity was withdrawn as the basis of legitimacy of rights of kings. Republican form of government in the formal and effective sense come into being. Sources of knowledge passed beyond seminaries and mission controlled institutions. Encyclopedias of knowledge appeared that summarized results of secular pursuits of knowledge. Humanism as an idea that put man at the centre of universe with the dictum 'Man is the measure of all things' grew as currency. The idea that God made man was reversed. Man's mental abilities had constructed the idea of God, or for that matter any idea, later writers thought, was a social construct. In this process of assertion of ideas and growth of specialisations, Religion, its theory and practice encompassing our total knowledge. Even within Sociology, the theme sociology of Religion has grown into a specialisation that is offered as an optional course. Our next effort will be to see how have sociologists reflected upon religion and society.

Box 1.1: Society and Religion

The relationship between society and religion is the central point in sociological studies of religion. Three dimensions can be traced:

- 1) Religion provides the overarching frame within which social life is organised and gives a meaning and value standards that guide social activities.
- 2) Religion is one of the major institutions of society that plays a defined and limited role in society.
- 3) Religion influences some aspects of social life, and in turn gets influenced by other sectors of life; and that there could be several aspects of life that are independent of religion and vice-versa.

There can be a set of inquiries that relate to time periods over which changes and modifications of the role of religion in society keep on occurring.

Durkheim (1859-1917) is foremost among twentieth century sociologists to have raised the issue of scientific approach to the nature of religion. Religion is found in all societies, primitive, medieval or modern. In primitive societies it is found in its simplest form. Developed societies are complex and religion too acquires complexities of ideas and procedures of worship. The simplest form is the purest he asserts, hence the essence of religion can be studied there. The difference between elements and complexes as used in chemistry would be useful here. A combination of the elements make for compounds and complexes, and in the last case properties of the elements are difficult to be separated. Hence for understanding the nature of something it is advisable to go to the elements and study their properties. Any social institution likewise can be understood the best at its most elementary form. The primitive societies contain the most elementary form of social life. Religion in such a society will then provide the elementary form of the institution, free from other influences or outgrowth. In this sense, such a study even though focused upon a single case would be sufficient to provide the picture of the purest form of religion. In that sense, one study would have the property of an experimental study.

Where could one locate such a society? On the island of Australia certain tribes were living before the British discovered that area. These people were illiterate. They could be studied on the basis of what early explorers wrote about them. Such accounts were available in the library in Paris. Durkheim used that material and produced a book with a title that in English can be described as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The Original in French was published in 1912 and was among his first works to be translated into English in 1915.

1.4 Study of Totems

Among the aborigines of Australia, the case of the ARUNTA tribal group attracted Durkheim's attention. These people were totemic in the sense that they considered themselves to be related to the spirits of plants and animals in such a way that they could be recognised by that connection. They would respect the totem animal, never harm it, organise public functions full of music and dancing in its honour; paint their faces and bodies to give the celebrations a look different from the ordinary. Some of the places associated with its movement too would be respected. In case, under very extraordinary circumstances, if they have to kill the animal, all sorts of excuses and public expressions of urgency or necessity would have to be enacted to convince people of the extraordinary contingency.

Reflection and Action 1.1

Do you think that complex religions like Hinduism have any place for totemic thinking? Write down your answer and discuss with others.

In normal conditions, the tribe aligned itself with the spirit of the totem. The feeling of the group as a collection of people heightened the idea and sense of belongingness to a common totem. This was also defined as an exogamous group with no marriages occurring within it. The social definition got asserted with every collective activity. It is in this sense that Durkheim described these ceremonies and the spirit behind them as the soul of society (the group). It is in these celebrations and their contribution to the solidarity of the group that Durkheim said the essence of religion and its function for the society. Here was religion existing in full vigour among the simplest people, in its simplest form, its purest one, which did not worry even about the complex characterisation of God. Durkheim did not consider God to be an essential component of religion, and on this count even mentioned the case of Buddhism in support of his contention. A clarification is needed here. When Durkheim said that religion was the soul of society, and had the integrative function for society, the reference point was the simple society. He later clarified that religion began to amass all the body of knowledge of things worth knowing. Sciences developed later they began to interpret nature differently. A secular explanation of knowledge became possible. Schools and universities could grow outside the Church and he did visualize that the scope of explaining nature as well as human actions could increasingly become scientific and on that score of efficacy of religion as a power of explanation would decline.

1.5 The Secular Approaches

A few events and movements that preceded them need to be recalled. In the nineteenth century, Europe there was a general mistrust of the Jews;

and yet, they had great scholarly traditions and their material success had created a lot of jealousy against them which almost expressed itself in racial terms. In Germany quite a few scholars found their parents getting converted to Christianity; and the second, third generations of the like of Max Weber and Karl Marx found themselves in that category. Durkheim lived on the borders of France and Germany, and he too was brought up in a Jewish family. In his School days, this bright student was seen by others to becoming a trained priest. The loss of the territory to Germany in 1871 and of his father prompted Durkheim to move to Paris and he became an agnostic that is a person not practicing any faith. Thus his views on the nature of religions become even more significant. Secondly, after the defeat of France in the War. The despotic rule of Napoleon-II was brought to end, and the third Republic in France took shape. The Republic was normally opposed to the interests of the combined group of the monarchs and their families, the nobility and the Church. Hence there was a stake in making the Republican institutions of administration, army, and education qualitatively better than previous dispensations. Durkheim's help was taken to improve secular basis of education away from the control of the Church and as Professor of Education.

- a) he played his part in training qualified teachers; and
- b) in the field of sociology of promoting scientific studies of social phenomena. He had some views on the relative significance of science and religion in the explanation of social affairs of that a little later.

Among the writers towards the middle of the twentieth century. Merton commented upon the role of collective participation in the life of the tribal peoples, and the practices that seemingly appeared non-rational in terms of cause and effect, certainly acquired a significance when viewed in terms of their contribution to social solidarity. He thought this to be the latent function of religion. Merton further wondered if functional alternatives could be developed for religion, and whether communism itself shared the operational details of religious rituals.

Persons treated religion as a repository of the values of society (L). These provide the basis for legitimation of rules of conduct and discipline the very institution of law (I). Such modes of resolving disputes in a society enabled the polity to function and achieve common goals of the society (G); and these guided the manner in which the economy of the society got organised to make use of the natural resources through adaptation (A). In the famous paradigm of social system (A-G-I-L; the first activity is governed by the second, the second by the third, and the third by the fourth). It is to this last function (Latency) that religion belongs. In terms of sectors of a system, these are represented by economy, polity, legal arrangements, and Religion. Other set of writers have tried to look into the way religion and other specific aspects are related e.g., religion and economy, religion and polity, religion and legal arrangements.

1.6 Economy and Religion

Two views on the inter-relationship of economy and religion can be examined (i) that a concern with material welfare and this worldly development leads to a lack of interest or concern with other worldly matters that religion seems to promote. In this sense religion becomes gradually irrelevant to economic prosperity, or may even hinder the process of growth. Examples are given of the Asian religions, Hinduism, Islam and Confucianism where contentment with what one has got is emphasized

and blessings sought for either a better life in the next world or birth, or the day of judgement when the Almighty will seek a balance of deeds good or bad. Islam promotes the idea of making gifts of a proportion of income as zakat, forbids taking interest on loans, but allows profit sharing. These ideas have been taken to be not conducive to the growth of capital and its results. The Hindu view on the concern of better life in the next birth or the attainment of the *moksha* is considered to promote tolerance with existing set of circumstances not to try harder to earn more and lead a better material life in this world. On the other hand, a second view on religion holds that (2) the spirit of religion can encourage a man to work hard consider work as worship, earn more money, working for greater length of time, 'time is money' and go in for greater savings, money saved is money earned, and then make use of these savings for earning more 'money, that is converting it into capital'. Over a long period of time, material benefits, comforts and luxuries flow and the pleasures so defined are obtained in this world and this life itself. 'The heaven is brought to the earth' in this fashion. Among the Christians such an attitude is fully expressed in the Protestant sects, whereas the Catholics appears to be similar to other regions. In terms of paths to development, the protestants were found in the 19th century Germany itself to be going in more for studies in technologies and sciences, whereas the Catholics found greater satisfaction in humanities and arts. Such an examination of facts and reflection on the peoples attitudes towards material success paved the way of Max Weber (1864-1920) writing his famous treatise on *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (Eng. Tr. 1930). He had dealt with the role of civilisation in the shaping of human conduct which 'in western Europe and Western Europe alone' provided the basis of rational organization of life in all walks of which capitalism was a part. The time period he had in mind was the 19th Century, and the phenomenon he was trying to explain was the rise of capitalism. The facts of its early growth first in England, then in Holland and in Germany next in contrast to the late growth confirm his views seem to in other catholic countries like Spain, France, and Italy.

1.7 The Rise of Capitalism

The rise of capitalism and the corresponding decline in the significance of agriculture, and the transfer of surplus so generated for industrial growth are some of the common features to which prominent economists and social scientists of Europe had drawn attention. On this score Marx and Weber were treading on the same ground. The difference, however, got somewhat accentuated where Marx made a distinction between the basic structure and super structure of society. In the preface to the Critique of political economy, Marx mentioned that law, ethical standards, and their literary expositions were relative, in the sense that the social strata to which people belonged conditioned them. Religion too belonged to that sphere. Its role in society was clarified by Marx to be one where under difficult stresses and strains, man turned for solace to religion, which provided the last refuge for a tormented mind. This manner of dealing with a crisis was considered non-rational, a situation where one's creative faculties nearly went under sleep, as if taken over by opium a situation that does no grace to man and his human qualities. He saw in the people laying prostrate before a deity as the procession rolled on, as in the case of Jagannath of Puri, a surrender of human grace and merits. In a philosophy where man is the centre of the world, even the idea of God is treated as a social construct; and in Marxian perspective matter prevails over ideas. As such ideas, faiths, even legal systems follow the need for

sustaining material conditions of life, and cannot be treated as the driving force for economic transformation which Weber tried to establish. Marx belonged to the set of writers who would deny religion the central role for guiding rational human activity. On the other hand, those who accord religion the primacy in human conduct feel that scope of rational activities in life is limited, that questions of faith cannot be judged on the basis of reason and science, but faith and mystic experience hold the key to the understanding of religion. Max Weber's position is unique in the sense that he considers a particular form of religion to be the driving force of human efforts in the rational organisation of economy of a specific type of capitalism.

Box 1.2: Place of Religion

What would be the place of religion in non-simple societies? The hold of organised religions on their followers during the middle ages has been commented upon by a host of historians and theologians. Effects of the spread of such religions to other peoples too talked about in case of Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam and Confucianism and Shintoism, besides their impact upon the tribal peoples. The two way process in which the great religions have also been affected by local religions has drawn attention of scholars. A few examples of the last process as it operated in India can be briefly mentioned.

G.S.Ghurye (1967) thought that the Mahabharata contained the essence of the Indian Society, that Sanskrit language was its clearest medium, and the brahmins the carriers of such a tradition (Inaugural Address to the 7th Indian Sociological Conference). In *Caste, Class and Occupation* he has traced the nature of the caste as it emerged through the Ages. Irawati Karve carried forward the analysis of Kinship Organisation in India from the Mahabharata days till the middle of the 20th century to trace continuities and modifications in the kinship organisation linking them to their regional spread. Folk tales and dramatic presentations and to the Sanskritic sources where they made sense. The Census Commissioner of India 1931, J.H.Hutton in his work *Caste in India* examined the pre-Aryan influences on the Hindu Social order and opined that the incorporation of tribal deities within the Hindu fold was best exemplified in Shiva being made of a part of the trinity. Later scholars have indicated how the Buddha was given the status of an Avtar within the Hindu cosmology.

1.8 Gods and Goddesses

In the same context we may mention inclusion of a work in the curriculum of the open University in UK. *Gods of Heaven House of Gods— A Study of Popular Prints*, a work by an Indian Sociologist of Art O.P.Joshi (1994) written for a wider audience introducing the way popular prints mostly used in calendars and holy books have standardised the image and paraphernalia of objects associated with their worship. The initiatives taken by Raja Ravi Verma of Thiruvananthapuram at the turn of the 19th and beginning of 20th century are recalled in his oil coloured paintings depicting Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Ganapati, Gouri, Kali and the various Avatars of Vishnu, 89 such prints being brought out through lithograph printing press set up for the purpose. The prints became highly popular. The originals in bright oil paintings depicted gods and goddesses in dignified postures, amidst natural or courtly scenes, with aristocratic dress in quite a few cases.

Reflection and Action 1.2

Do many gods and goddesses indicate that the religion is polytheistic not monotheistic? Discuss and note down in your notebook.

Later the popular prints covered scenes from puranic and epic stories, e.g., Krishna dancing on the Kalia nag, or Durga slaying Mahishasur and coronation of Rama etc. Scenes of Heaven and Hell, and personification of cosmic powers got depicted. Saints and *rishis* as well as political personalities also found the place. The pictures are used for sacred purposes at worship during festivals, and natural or courtly scenes and heroic deeds find a placement in drawing rooms. Modernised three dimensional versions are now printed in Shivkashi (Tamil Nadu) and Singapore. Brief introduction to Hindu religious sources are available for ready reference. The highly illustrative work with its colours and neat explanations has been found suitable by the Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK76RA, UK to be included among 'students text books' with permission to use in various formats for the staff and students for the course of world religions beginning 2006.

A different picture comes up when intensive studies are undertaken on a micro scale both in time and place and the way the interaction among different scales get attempted. Let us have a look into them briefly.

1.9 Ethnographic Accounts

The references to the works in the foregoing paragraph relate methodologically to the studies being attempted on a macro scale both in time and space, time from the Mahabharata or even earlier days to 20th century, and space covering India as a whole. Among the intensive studies conducted over a limited area in the twentieth century. Srinivas's work *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (1952) stands out as the path breaking one. He connects various social groups like the family, the caste, the village with certain deities specific to each, and mentions the public ceremonials associated with them in the nature of festivals. While these have been examined in the case of the coorg people, the contextual references make clear how some of the practices get related to Sanskritic sources and get modified in that direction. He calls this a process of sanskritization of rituals and behaviour which when adopted by a lower group becomes the medium through which the impure connections are given up and the pure ones as defined in the scriptures or by priests adopted. It is hoped that such a process of purification may ultimately lead to the removal of the stigma associated with the impure, and the group gain some upward mobility. Discussions on the concept have enlivened sociological deliberations for nearly a quarter of a century.

The question of links between the local traditions and their classical connections came to the fore as a group of Anthropologists from Chicago concentrated on the nature of Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilisation (Marriott 1955). Milton Singer examined Krishna Leela observations in the city of Madras (now Chennai) to see how the place and time of performance have become open or secular with theatre as a place, and any time of the year as a recreation programme. Mandelbaum commented on the same in the two volume studies of continuity and change. The idea of the pure and the impure no doubt traceable to Durkheim's classification of facts into the sacred and the profane, became central to the treatise on caste by Dumont: *The Homo Hierarchicus* (19). But back to Marriott who introduced the concept universalisation to the

process through which a local deity or a festival gets wider acceptance and incorporated into the greater civilisation; conversely the word Parodialization refers to the classical form getting local shape and meaning. In traditional Indian treatment of the subject, Poet *Tulsidas* continuously refers to a combination of the classical and the local forms through the words *Shastriya* and *Laukik*, the earlier one also called *Vidhi Purvak* or according to the prescribed procedure.

In relation to festivals and deities a classification has been evolved into (1) the All India (2) peninsular or regional and (3) the local spread. The upward and downward trends have been noticed and form exerting material for sociological inquiries. The rise of new centres and schools call for attention like the cult of Sai Baba, *Vaishnodevi*, or *Santoshi ma*, Society for Krishna consciousness have gained international stature, as also the *Gayatri Peeth*. The rise and fall of centres of alteration among the followers continues to be of interest to sociologists.

1.10 Conclusion

Max Weber's treatment of Hinduism as a religion concerned with the position of a person in the next birth and *moksha* in the final stage to the exclusion of efforts at gaining material rewards in this birth thereby holding the growth of economy along industrial capitalism have received sufficient notice. A phrase like 'a baniya cannot become a capitalist' got coined in the process to distinguish between non-rational and rational economic activities, a difference that related to tradition and modernity as two poles, that had earlier been described as systems based on custom rather than contract. The response of Indian Sociologists, particularly of Yogendra Singh, got articulated in the idea of continuity of tradition in the modern setting and others talked of modernising of tradition. Examples like electrification of temples, bureaucratic efficiency in temple management and sanskritizing items in media have been given to highlight the point. One sees cassettes and C.D.'s, serials ranging from the Mahabharata and Ramayana to Sai Baba. The case of *charvak* philosophy with material emphasis, of specialised trading groups now excelling in management techniques, are also mentioned and a sort of a neutral statement summing up the inter-relationship of religion and economic growth in India arrived at by stating that religion is not a restrictive force in economic development and tradition and modernity coexist in the Indian setting.

1.11 Further Reading

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