

## *Annemie Dillen and Judith Gruber*

# **Gender, Race, Religion: De/constructing Regimes of In/visibility**

### **Abstract**

This contribution introduces the theme “Gender, Race, Religion: De/constructing Regimes of In/visibility” of the 2019 conference of the European Society for Women in Theological Research. It outlines the societal and theological relevance of this theme, clarifies the key terms and indicates some of the research questions that emerge in the intersectional field of gender, race and religion, with a particular focus on how these categories intersect in productions of social in/visibility.

**Keywords:** Gender; race; religion; invisibility; feminist theology.

### **Resumen**

Esta contribución introduce el tema “Género, raza, religión: de/construyendo regímenes de in/visibilidad”, del congreso del año 2019 de Asociación Europea de Mujeres para la Investigación Teológica. En esta introducción, se resume la relevancia social y teológica del presente volumen, se clarifican los términos clave y se indican algunas de las cuestiones académicas que emergen en el campo interseccional de género, raza y religión, poniendo especial atención en cómo estas categorías intersectan con la producción de la in/visibilidad social.

**Palabras clave:** género; raza; religión; invisibilidad; teología feminista.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Beitrag führt in das Thema „Gender, Rasse, Religion: De-/Konstruktion von Ordnungen der Un-/Sichtbarkeit“ der Konferenz der Europäischen Gesellschaft für theologische Forschung von Frauen 2019 ein. Er skizziert die gesellschaftliche und theologische Relevanz dieses Themas, klärt die Schlüsselbegriffe und weist auf die Forschungsfragen hin, die im intersektionalen Feld von Gender, Rasse und Religion auftauchen, mit einem besonderen Fokus auf der Frage, wie diese Kategorien sich in der Produktion sozialer Un-/Sichtbarkeit überschneiden.

**Schlagwörter:** Gender; Rasse; Religion; Unsichtbarkeit; feministische Theologie.

### **Introduction: gender, race and religion**

Women and religion, or women in the Church – for theologians, these have been common topics for a few decades. There is, of course, much to say, and the debates continue. Contemporary feminist thinking shows us that an intersectional approach is important to understand issues.<sup>1</sup> This means that gender issues, and gender and religion issues, should not be discussed as stand-alone topics, for they interact largely with various other social issues, such as socio-economic status or education. One of the other axes, besides gender, on which power is exercised and privileges and domination are experienced, is “race.”

For the 2019 ESWTR conference, we have chosen to deepen our reflection on the relationship between these three complex fields: “gender, race, and religion.” In this contribution, we will explain the relevance of this topic, and explore some aspects of the triad “gender, race, religion.” We do not want to present a report of the conference or summarize the main insights. We refer to some aspects discussed during the conference in order to highlight the meaning of the topic and the title “Gender, Race, Religion: De/constructing Regimes of In/visibility.” We will also raise questions, without pretending to have clear answers. This article should be considered as a programmatic text, which might stimulate others to continue the reflection and to start with more research and discussion in this area.

By discussing these three concepts in relationship to each other, we want to show how underlying patterns in society function in favor of specific groups of people and oppress others. The question here is how theologians can help to make these patterns more visible in order to contribute to the flourishing of everyone and to more justice in society.

Our first associations with the triad “gender, race, and religion” lead us to societal debates on the veiling of women. Why is covering a female head so often considered as a problem when these women identify as Muslim, and so rarely when they are Christian, e.g. nuns? Religion becomes “racialized” and people might feel oppressed because of their religion/race. On the other hand, societies are confronted with many forms of discrimination or oppression of women in the name of a particular religion, and with the legitimization of racist actions in the name of religion or in the name of the so called “liberation of women.” The discussion about the veil illustrates this last point again:<sup>2</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” in: *Stanford Law Review* 43/6 (1991) 1241-1299.

<sup>2</sup> Joan W. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ 2007).

various countries in Europe, people argue that Muslim women, often with Arabic roots, wearing a veil are oppressed and thus have to be liberated by a ban on wearing veils in public spaces. Others stand up to protest: this so-called feminism, which aims at liberating others by taking away their freedom of expression and religion, by limiting their own rights of self-determination in terms of choosing what to wear, is certainly not what is wanted by many feminist theologians and scholars in religion. Thus, the question of “covered women” illustrates the complexity of debates around gender, race, and religion. At the same time, however, many Muslim women experience a kind of “fatigue” when they are repeatedly confronted with this question, as Schirin Amir-Moazami outlined in her keynote lecture given at the ESWTR conference.<sup>3</sup> Jewish women too are often oppressed in name of a racialized religion, where certain Christian groups distance themselves from Jewish groups in order to cultivate a sense of nationalism and belonging.<sup>4</sup> This dualistic thinking is often particularly difficult for women who are in many other ways also in underprivileged situations.

As indicated, we wanted to focus on “race” during the conference. Some prefer to speak about ethnicity, as “race” reminds some people about practices and theories as we know them from the second World War and the period before.<sup>5</sup> However, especially in contemporary contexts and in the English speaking world, the term “race” is not an outdated term which should not to be used anymore, but refers to a living and often painful reality for many people who are, even today, oppressed in name of their “race.” What is needed, is a critical theory of race.<sup>6</sup> This is developed within various disciplines, also within theology.<sup>7</sup> A critical concept of race is important to address racist structures in societies.

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<sup>3</sup> Schirin Amir-Moazami (ed.), *Der inspizierte Muslim: Zur Politisierung der Islamforschung in Europa* (Transcript Verlag: Bielefeld 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the situation in Poland, Marek Kucia, Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Mateusz Magierowski, “Anti-Semitism in Poland: Survey results and a qualitative study of Catholic communities,” in: *Nationalities Papers*, 42/1 (2014), 8-36; See also Piotr Żuk, “Anti-Semitism in Poland, yesterday and today,” in: *Race & Class* 58/3 (2017), 81-86.

<sup>5</sup> For recent shifts in the German-speaking world around the taboo of using “Rasse,” cf. Mithu Sanyal, “Suddenly, it’s OK to be German and to talk about race,” in: *The Guardian* (18 September 2019)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.), *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia 1995); Adrien K. Wing (eds.), *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader* (New York University Press: New York 2003), Critical America.

<sup>7</sup> Within feminist theology, a critical discussion around race has played an important role from an early stage onwards, as womanist theologians highlighted how the experiences of oppression and desires for liberation of black women differ in significant ways from those of white women.

Recently, we learned about the experience of a highly-educated Muslim woman with Moroccan roots for whom it was difficult to find a house to rent in a country such as the Netherlands, even though she had a stable income. This is not a one-off example, as we learned from someone working in a rental office. In Belgium, Unia, the “independent institution that combats discrimination” advocates strongly against racial discrimination on the rental market.<sup>8</sup> The example of the women with Moroccan roots is only one of many examples of how structural racism and discrimination on the basis of gender and religion; are often intertwined.

### **De/constructing regimes of In/visibility**

The concepts “gender, race, and religion” are not static ideas. We use them here in reference to processes in society, which we call “genderisation,” “racialization” and “religionisation.”<sup>9</sup> These neologisms indicate that gender, race and religion are not “just there,” but are constructed in a society, in social interaction, through discourses and practices. This means their meaning can also be deconstructed. In other words, one can show how the terms “gender,” “race” and “religion” can take on different meanings and interpretations, or how they are used in unjust ways. One example can illustrate this. Geert Mak, a Dutch author, writes in his most recent book *Grote verwachtingen (Big expectations)*:

After 9/11, children did not call each other immigrant any more. They no longer looked at their ethnic origin, but only called themselves and each other Muslims. No Pakistani, no Iranian, no Iraqi, no: we are Muslims. In a certain way, this brought about unity: we share the same faith. On the other hand, it also brought about stricter social control: what do you eat, what do you drink, who do you go out with?<sup>10</sup>

This is an example of “religionisation.” The religion becomes suddenly much more visible than before, as a clear result of specific discourses and patterns of social interaction. After 9/11 the category “Muslim” is constructed as the negative counterpart of what many consider as the “West” and of what is

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unia.be/nl/actiedomeinen/huisvesting>, 7 May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> For intersections between racialisation and religionisation, cf. Anya Topolski, “The Race-Religion Constellation: A European Contribution to the Critical Philosophy of Race,” in: *Critical Philosophy of Race* 6/1 (2018), 58-81.

<sup>10</sup> Geert Mak, *Grote verwachtingen: In Europa, 1999-2019* (Atlas Contact: Amsterdam 2019), 76.

good. For some Muslim persons, this dualistic worldview increases their self-awareness as “Muslims,” which leads in turn to a search for what is “a good Muslim.”

Many identitarian movements in Europe use religion as a way to express their specific identity. This is also true for the reference to the so-called “Judeo-Christian” tradition. The combination of Jewish and Christian does not necessarily refer to an inherent connection between these two religions, but is often used by Christians as a way to distance oneself from Muslims. The term “Judeo-Christian” often means “non-Muslim,” even for those who do not consider themselves a believer or faithful.<sup>11</sup> The religious reference functions to express one’s own particular identity.

Genderisation refers, among others, to the increased visibility of gender norms, which often go together with the two other processes of racialisation and religionisation. An example given by Schirin Amir-Moazami in her keynote lecture “Regimes of in/visibility, Secular Embodiments and the Coupling of Gender, Race and Religion in Public Controversies on Muslim Bodily Practices in Europe” can illustrate this. Referring to an increased attention for covered female bodies, she argued that the prohibition to wear burkinis in many swimming pools evidences this genderisation that goes together with religionisation and racialisation. For this prohibition is mainly a means to exclude those who are considered “others,” in this case, Muslim women from swimming, whereby “Muslim” often refers not only to religion but also to “race.” On the other hand, non-covered female bodies are allowed to be shown, but are at the same time much less visible because they get considerably less attention in public discourse. The same is true for the pictures of half-naked women in advertisements, movies, and clips, which are mostly tolerated. This distinction between what is and what is not discussed about the covering of the female body explains how what is tolerated and what is not, is the result of “regimes” – structured social discourses – and of (often implicit) rules.

An experience of one of our students can function as another illustration of the manner in which these processes are diffused with power. A dentistry student, who was born in Armenia and identifies as Christian, told the story of how she was looking for an internship and was asked on the phone whether she was wearing a veil. She answered in Dutch that she was not as she was a

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<sup>11</sup> For a nuanced exploration of these dynamics, cf. the contributions in Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski (eds.), *Is there a Judeo-Christian Tradition?: A European Perspective* (De Gruyter: Berlin 2016) Perspectives on Jewish texts and contexts 4.

Christian. Then, there was no problem. This question shows how a foreign name, in combination with a non-native pronunciation of Dutch, immediately leads to an association with a particular group and, then again, to a specific interpretation of it. The logic behind this question is: “Foreign women are Muslims and Muslim women wear veils, and that is problematic.” This is, however, very often considered more problematic for women in higher positions than for those in cleaning jobs, for it seems that society has less problems with women in cleaning jobs who wear a veil. Probably because women in higher positions are more often (already) considered a “threat” to those who have more power and privileges. This particular example does not stand alone: it illustrates many similar practices or comments, which are the consequences of constructed ideas about gender, race, and religion.

This construction is the result of power processes. What is considered as adequate for a particular gender, specific religion, or people of a specific race is often constructed by people in power positions. Politicians decide about what is considered as an appropriate way to express one’s religion, what can be visible and what not, but very often the processes of “religionization” and “racialization” remain hidden and are covered up by so called good intentions: “liberating women” or “protecting the freedom of choice” (Schirin Amir-Moazami). The process of “religionization” refers to the process where the religion of people is considered as something that matters for making distinctions between themselves and the others, although precisely making these distinctions is also very often oppressed, when certain forms of religious expression are considered as dangerous by those in power. They confront people with “otherness.” In broad terms, this is often called “othering.”

This construction is the result of power processes: processes which are often called othering, because they are the effect of the confrontation with “otherness.” This implies that what is considered as adequate for a particular gender, specific religion, or people of a specific race is often constructed by people in power positions. “Religionisation” refers to the process where the religion of people is considered as something that matters for making distinctions between oneself and others as well as of the oppression of these distinctions when they are considered as dangerous by those in power. Thus, politicians decide what is considered as an appropriate way to express one’s religion, what can be visible and what not, but very often these processes of “religionization” and “racialization” remain hidden and are covered up by so called good intentions: “liberating women” or “protecting the freedom of choice” (Schirin Amir-Moazami).

### **In whose interests?**

What is made visible and invisible is the result of choices that serve particular interests. It is a clear characteristic of feminist theology to ask this critical question: “in whose interests are we speaking/acting?” The processes described so far are the products of the interests of people and institutions who try to achieve power. The question at stake here is: who profits from processes where certain views on gender, race, and religion are used as means to claim one’s identity, and who does not benefit from these processes? Racism is a mechanism that helps people to claim their own superiority and to help them feel self-confident.<sup>12</sup> Remarks to a woman of color such as “but you are different (than all the other persons of your religion/race/gender), you are one of us,” are an example of a racism that remains almost invisible. These comments start from a general negative idea about these women as a group, and then make an exception for this particular woman. A clear way of binary thinking in order to stimulate the sense of group identity (“we”) lies behind these kinds of expressions. They are very common in today’s society.

Other forms of racism are more visible, and much less tolerated nowadays. The renovation of the Africa-museum in Tervuren (Brussels) might function here as a case in point. The participants to the ESWTR conference visited this museum, that reopened in 2019 after five years of renovation and intensive reorganisation in order to deal with its colonial heritage. The original museum showed many objects and pictures, often taken away from Congo, the former colony of Belgium, and presented them without much critical reflection. The renewed museum wants to make visitors aware of the inherent racism and colonial supremacy of many of the old objects. Some objects were removed, as they were clearly not tolerable in a postcolonial society. The museum also shows movies of men and women in Africa today, and focuses on the flourishing of people in Africa, on the beauty and the treasures in their culture and way of living. One can however ask critically why there is not much more focus on the dangers of racism and colonialism and why the wounds of the colonization are so easily covered by a story of healing.<sup>13</sup> It seems as if the museum wants to cover up the negative aspects of the past in order to step

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<sup>12</sup> Peggy McIntosh, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in: Maxine B. Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Michael Messner (eds.), *Gender through the Prism of Difference* (Oxford University Press: New York 1988), 235-238.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Gruber, “Doing Theology with Cultural Studies: Rewriting History – Reimagining Salvation – Decolonizing Theology,” in: *Louvain Studies* 42/2 (2019), 103-123.

quickly to a new, resilient future. Is the pain really recognized? Or in Christian terms, is this not too easily a step from Good Friday to Easter, without recognizing the despair, the suffering, and the silence of Holy Saturday?<sup>14</sup> Dealing with traumas from the past seems to be very difficult. In her keynote lecture at the ESWTR conference, Anya Topolski also pointed this out when she referred to the massive killing of witches in the past, women who were killed because they did not have the “right” gender and religion. But this part of history is rarely told and easily forgotten. For people tend to switch easily to positive stories, as in the case of their colonial history.

However, it would be a very constructive and positive step forwards, when people would accept the value of recognizing the wounds, the scars, the injustice done to others without covering it up in positive stories of healing and resilience. The difficulty of this process becomes clear, if we compare it to the strategies commonly used by people when others express their pain or suffering. We can ignore the pain of others, and just behave as if nothing happened, only focusing at what has to be done next, or we can hear the pain, but come up with easy solutions. This kind of reaction fits what is often called a “reparation strategy”: when a hospitalized patient expresses her despair, a nurse might easily say something as “this happened to me too,” “keep up your courage, you have plenty other possibilities,” “it will be all right” or “you can’t help this, it is not your fault.” All these sentences do not really acknowledge the pain and the feelings of the patient. People tend to be very hesitant to really listen to feelings of pain, also in daily life. It often confronts them with their own insecurity, pain, and doubts.

Real, active listening to the other and showing empathy, giving space for expressing the negative feelings is very important, but not easy. From the perspective of those who are in a privileged position, however, that is the only – but very complex – way to show real solidarity with the other. Recognising how difficult it is, and perhaps expressing the complexity of one’s own position (as being in a privileged situation),<sup>15</sup> would help those who survived serious forms of oppression due to patriarchy, colonialism, racism, sexism, etc. Acknowledging that what happened in the past was wrong and making the wounds visible would help survivors to get recognition. It would also help to

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Vandenhoeck, “Stille zaterdag in de zorg voor mensen met dementie. Een ‘en toch’ vanuit pastoraaltheologisch perspectief”, in: *Collationes* 39/4 (2009), 401-411.

<sup>15</sup> Claudia Brunner, “Von Selbstreflexion zu Hegemonieselbstkritik,” in: *S&F Sicherheit und Frieden* 35/4 (2014), 196-201.

make these forms of evil more visible. In the Africa Museum, something more could still be done in this respect. The same is true for many other museums – such as e.g. also in Belgium the Suske and Wiske museum.<sup>16</sup> This recently renovated museum offers lots of experiences about how comics are made, in an all in all very positive story, focused on the future. However, any reference to or excuse about the manner in which these particular comics have used racist and stereotypical ways of presenting African people and women is absent.

Many other examples can be given, especially about the Church. Although victims of sexual child abuse in the Church are increasingly recognised as such, for some theologians and church leaders it does not seem evident to openly confess that many people in the world, especially women, have suffered from the Church and actions by clerics and pastoral ministers.<sup>17</sup> It seems to be very difficult to openly speak about the scars of the past, the wounds made by specific institutions, groups or cultural practices/products.

Another example illustrates how gender, race, and religion are often used in a way that oppresses certain groups of people and gives privileges to others. In Belgium and Austria, you have to be recognizable when you are in public space. It is forbidden to cover your face, except when it is carnival. This rule is especially directed at preventing Muslim women to cover their faces on the street. It is an example of a “regime,” stating what the right form of dressing and expressing one’s religion and gender is. A recent visit to the Philippines functioned as an eye-opener to the different ways in which norms about covering faces are constructed: many men and women were driving bicycles or motorbikes with their faces totally covered, in order to protect themselves against the air pollution. A local colleague did not understand how this could be forbidden in Belgium. The recent corona-crisis, asking many people to wear a mouth mask for health reasons, again confronted the Belgian society with a paradox. The letter of the law would forbid people to wear mouth masks on the street. Again, it was clear that this law was only directed at Muslim women. A similar example about refers to Judaism. When a Chassidic Jew in Antwerp told a newspaper that he would refuse to shake hands with a woman, this was considered as very problematic. This person could not be put on the list of a political party, a Belgian political party decided. Shaking hands was considered as the ultimate form of respect, and this was a form of discrimination of

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.suskeenwiskemuseum.be/>, 11 May 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Doris Wagner, *Nicht mehr ich. Die wahre Geschichte einer jungen Ordensfrau* (Edition a: Wien 2014).

women in name of the religion. However, in 2020, someone who wants to shake hands is diabolized. Shaking hands is absolutely forbidden for health reasons. Of course, these are totally different situations and there are very good (health) reasons why covering one's face or not shaking hands is now tolerated. Nevertheless, both examples show how norms are constructed and how religion, race and gender often intersect when societal norms are expressed.

### **The role of theology**

The processes of genderrisation, racialisation, and religionisation can be illustrated by many more examples. In daily life situations, maleness and whiteness are often considered as the (implicit) norm, very often combined with a presumption that persons are (cultural) Christians.<sup>18</sup> If people are confronted with people of color, women, Muslims, Jews or people of other religions, then the focus is very often concentrated on only or mainly this particular point of one's identity. In many cases, the "otherness" (such as a black skin, a veil, a turban, ...) becomes very visible, and not seldom functions as a basis for discrimination. The German theologian Eske Wollrad explained this clearly in her keynote lecture "White Families: Christianity and the Art of Transgression". The next question is then: what is the role of theology in this situation?

Wollrad showed that, although black theologies and feminist theologies have grown extensively and in various forms during the last decades, there is a long way to go for theologies that deal with maleness or with whiteness. Theologies from the perspective of those who are often considered as the "oppressed," are developed partly in line with liberation theologies. The question, however, is what it means to develop a theology that not only speaks about "the option for the poor" (as in Catholic social teaching) or about "solidarity" with people who are discriminated, but which also critically reflects on its own presuppositions. What would a theology that critically reflects on its implicit norms look like? It is important that theology is not just "inclusive" or "open for diversity" and does allow for "others" next to the centre with clear norms, but also that it reflects critically on this centre, on the norms, which are often made invisible.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Adil Khan and Michael Cowan, "Why Christian-Muslim 'Dialogue' is not always Dialogical," in: *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 28/2 (2018), 23-48; Mara Brecht, "Soteriological Privilege," in: Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (eds.) *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries* (Routledge: New York 2016), 85-98.

<sup>19</sup> See also Stefan Gärtner and Annemie Dillen (eds.), *Discovering Practical Theology: Exploring boundaries* (Peeters: Leuven 2020).

Eske Wollrad showed how whiteness is only rarely thematised in Christian theology – but very often presumed. Blackness is associated with darkness and sin in many Christian sources, and whiteness is often associated with light and God.<sup>20</sup> She also explained how the Christian history of colonisation (especially from a protestant German perspective) was an example of how white women dominated black women, because the wives of the (protestant) missionaries did have the “power to define.” This means that they were able to decide what was the proper belief, civilisation, and purity. These norms were not set by black women. This raises the question whether it is possible for white feminist theologians to speak critically about racism, if one belongs historically to the camp of the perpetrators? According to Wollrad, one important condition to develop an adequate theology which critically deals with whiteness is to avoid essentialism. Whiteness is part of many theologians’ positionality, including ours. It is however something constructed and dynamic, which can change and does not have to be considered as an essential part of one’s identity.

Critical whiteness studies often speak about white supremacy as a problem. Masculinity studies nowadays try to reconsider “masculinity” in a such way that it is not “toxic,” but interpreted in a positive way in solidarity with women. Wollrad suggests that this more complex interpretation might also be possible for whiteness. This is one step towards a theology that takes the complex interactions of gender, race, and religion seriously. Much more has to be done.

We hope this article might function as an eye-opener for this topic of the interrelatedness of gender, race and religion on the one hand and the constructed character of the norms and power aspects related to these concepts on the other hand. In mainstream theology this is a blind spot. However, there are a lot of theological themes at stake here. Without being able to give answers or to have clear solutions, we at least name a few of them and hope that these questions will stimulate more research and teaching in this field.

From a theological perspective, one could question how the creation stories can be interpreted in such a way that binary thinking, with a focus on essentialist identities, can be deconstructed. Or one can critically reflect on ways in which God or the trinity is presented during history and in contemporary systematic theology. How are “gender and race” intertwined in classical perceptions; and how is a constructive theology that goes beyond classical presentations of God as male or female, or white or black possible? Theological

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. also Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press: New Haven 2010).

imagination has the task to stimulate people to dare to walk in the shoes of the other, to critically reflect on one's own privileges and positionality. We sincerely hope the ESWTR congress of 2019 has contributed to stimulating this reflection.

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