A Protestant Opinion on the World Catechism of the Catholic Church*

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Since its beginnings the Christian church has fostered a process of formal instruction in the Christian faith, particularly in the early centuries as a preparation for baptism carried out primarily by adults. Whenever infants were baptized, instruction concerning the content of faith had to take place later. Catechism arose in the medieval period as an indication of the summary of the most important beliefs. But the true breakthrough occurred first in the sixteenth century. Both of Luther's catechisms of 1529—the Small Catechism written for parishes, the Large Catechism for pastors—have been recognized, also on the Roman Catholic side, as the first classic examples of a catechetical text of a new era. Around the middle of the century, the catechisms of Peter Canisius treated Luther's catechisms with contempt as did, above all, the Roman Catechism of 1566/67, a product of the Council of Trent.

The birth of Luther's catechisms precipitated a motif that is of immediate interest even today, which explains the large number of new catechetical publications in recent decades. As a pastor, Luther determined that the level of knowledge with regard to central Christian beliefs in congregations was poor. The 1528 examination of preaching, incumbent on pastors in parishes, revealed that even pastors were in need of instruction concerning the central contents of Christian doctrine. This explains why Luther composed, after this doctrinal examination of various congrega-

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tions, the two catechisms of 1529, one for parishioners and one for pastors. This, therefore, constitutes the reason why, also on the Roman Catholic side, catechisms for the instruction of parishes and pastors were being drawn up to strengthen their knowledge of the fundamental contents of faith, if only because by them one could certainly distinguish between Roman and Reformation doctrine. There is no doubt that the effort toward instruction in the Christian faith, in considerable measure on both sides, was effective. On the Lutheran side, Luther's catechisms were being established among the creeds of the church, particularly Luther's Small Catechism which, right up into our century, has served to instruct young people, primarily in preparation for confirmation. A similar significance was attached to the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) in the Reformed churches.

It is worth noting that the second half of our century has been marked to a great extent by the endeavor of putting together new accounts of the Christian faith, new catechisms. Admittedly, such texts arose now and then before, but not in such number nor with the intensity of a fresh penetration of beliefs. Nevertheless this time the initiative has come from the Catholic side, namely from the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII had even set the task himself for the Council to make the doctrines of the Church, "in their power and beauty," altogether accessible to the people of our age. Even after the Council, this proposal was taken up in the Netherlands, where one busied oneself with a new catechism for school instruction. Under the impression of the Council, the Commission, entrusted with the task previously mentioned, came to the conclusion that, in the changing situation of the world and the church, adult Christians should win over the content of their faith in fresh clarity. Accordingly, the catechism authorized by the Netherlands Conference of Catholic Bishops was characterized in the subtitle as "Teaching and Preaching [Glaubensverkündigung] for Adults," which reads similarly in the German translation. This document, which spread quickly throughout the entire world, was soon imitated—also as a result of the dispute over its new structure and content. Thus in 1975 a Protestant Catechism for Adults was published on behalf of the United Lutheran Church of Germany, and ten years later, after corresponding work in Italy (1981) and France (1984), the document A Catholic Adult Catechism appeared which was edited by the German Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Church Profession of Faith (1985) is a work which has been praised, and with right, as exemplary, owing to its consideration of the new theological work on central themes of the faith, particularly in dealing with biblical texts, and also owing to its ecumenical openness.

The new type of adult catechism is typical of an era in which there is

concern to confront the frightening decline of basic knowledge of the Bible and the Christian faith—how they have been held under the influence of secularism. Simultaneously, this catechetical form serves as an introduction to a novel appropriation of these beliefs for our contemporaries. The number of attempts which have ventured to do so has probably been one of the reasons that the Synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church (1985) asked the pope to allow the drawing up of such a work, as well as to validate it for the entire catholic, universal church. The need for a sure standardization of catechetical literature emerging on a regional basis was pronounced explicitly by the Synod of Bishops. The World Catechism was supposed to serve as a standard form for the corresponding regional works. As a result the criterion was also given by the Synod of Bishops: the presentation of Catholic faith and moral doctrine "must be biblical and liturgical, and offer sound doctrine suited to modern life."¹

The project aroused great expectations, not only in the Roman Catholic Church but also in the other churches of Christendom. Since Rome's ecumenical openness, awakened by the Second Vatican Council, there has been throughout all of Christendom the hope that Rome express herself in a truly catholic and shepherdly manner on behalf of the entire church. The German Catholic adult catechism (1985) gave us hope of a "wake-up" signal in this direction. Will the World Catechism, too, continue now on this path, in the spirit of the Council, toward the destination of an ecumenically responsible statement of the commonly shared Christian faith?

The present edition complies with such expectations only in individual passages. In all, it is certainly a "compendium of...the Roman Catholic faith and moral doctrine" in the sense of the confessional tradition of Roman Catholicism. But as it now stands the Catechism lacks the critical voices of Catholic theologians who complain that current developments in Catholic theology have gone unnoticed, not least the results of scholarly exegesis of the Bible. One has complained that the forwardlooking base of the Second Vatican Council was not emulated, even though the texts of this Council were cited more than all other sources, and that the Catechism lacks the ecumenical openness claimed by the Council in connection with the exposition of Catholic doctrine. Such particularly poignant criticisms have been made by the Freiburg fundamental theologian Hansjürgen Verweyen in his book, Der Welt-Katechismus: Therapie oder Symptom einer kranken Kirche? (1993). Moreover, Verweyen is a student of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who presided over the Cardinal Commission responsible for the Catechism—a Catholic theologian who is not by any means, as a matter of principle, very (so to

say) progressively minded and critical of the Church.

The arguments of the Catechism presented here should be assessed above all from the ecumenical point of view. To that end, I will be referring mainly to the first of the four parts of the work: "The Profession of Faith." But I will also give some consideration to the second part, "The Celebration of the Christian Mystery," the third part, "Life in Christ," as well as the fourth part, "Christian Prayer." The division as such is in accordance with the traditional structure of such catechisms. It turns up already in Luther's catechisms with, of course, a different order of themes. (There, in connection with the Lutheran teaching of "Law and Gospel," Law is accordingly treated first following the Decalogue, then Faith according to the Apostles' Creed, then the "Our Father," and finally the Sacraments.) However, a glance at the subject matter reveals that the organization of the Catechism of the Catholic Church has more in common with the Protestant concept of faith than differences, even as portraved in the Protestant Catechism for Adults of 1975, in which the presentation of the content of faith takes precedence and the themes of Christian behavior follow, while the life of worship and prayer are dealt with only at the end.

The first part of the Catholic Catechism ("The Profession of Faith"), which will occupy us here, begins with statements regarding the desire for God which is written in the human heart, ways of knowing God, the revelation of God as the way God makes himself known to humanity, as well as the transmission of revelation through Tradition and Scripture, and the human response of faith to God's revelation.

The use of the claim that humans tend toward God, the desire for God being "written in the human heart" (no. 27)—a human determination which can be "forgotten, overlooked, or even explicitly rejected" (no. 29)—is not only fundamentally correct, but also in keeping with the contemporary cultural situation which moves human understanding to the center. On the other hand, the next section repeats the arguments for the existence of God as arguments which, as it says, "attain certainty about the truth" (no. 31). Evidently, lying in the background of these statements are Thomas Aquinas's five ways of proving the existence of God. They, too, are expressly emphasized. The Catechism has nothing to say about the long history of philosophical criticism of these "proofs." The dispute with atheistic denials of the existence of God, however, will not be resolved in such a way. The Catechism here ties itself to a pre-modern basis of argumentation, instead of strengthening the basic yet explicit desire for God in human beings. The appeal to Paul's saying, that even since the creation of the world heathens have recognized the invisible reality of God in the things that have been made, does not agree with the

consequences of the theological exeges of this passage (Rom. 1:19–20). The Apostle does not speak about a human possibility of recognizing God but, on the contrary, that humans, whether they want to or not, actually know God and that the inescapability of this knowledge substantiates the judgment on unbelieving humanity. That has nothing to do with a possibility to which philosophical arguments for the existence of God lead.

In its explanation of God's way to humanity in his revelation, the Catechism adapts itself to the Second Vatican Council's salvation-historical [heilsgeschichtlichen] interpretation of revelatory events: the divine revelatory will realizes itself "by deeds and words which are intrinsically bound up with each other" (no. 53, citing DV 2), which is supported by biblical salvation history. Also well-founded biblically is that this revelatory will has been revealed in a final and unparalleled way in Jesus Christ (nos. 65f.). Unfortunately, the most fitting scriptural references to support this position have not been cited (Rom. 16:25f.; Eph. 1:9f.; 3:4-11; Col. 1:26f.). In tension with this entirely well-founded biblical view is the subsequent claim that the "fundamental revelation" [Grundoffenbarung] of the Old Testament consists of the declaration of the divine name to Moses (no. 203f.). The emphasis on this isolated episode is exegetically problematical and stands opposed to earlier statements regarding the revelation of God, which is truly an intermingling of deed and word. On this point a disturbing imbalance within the portrayal of the Catechism cannot be overlooked.

In the following article, which in the heading (before no. 74) speaks of "The Transmission of Divine Revelation," an understanding of revelation as doctrine, actually superseded by the Council, is frustrated—doctrine which, after all, can be transmitted noticeably while the Gospel is preached and must be preserved unscathed in the church (no. 77), the object of which is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, statements about the confessional, controversial theme of the relationship of Scripture and Tradition (nos. 8-95) consist almost entirely of quotations, above all from the documents of Vatican II, but almost without interpretational connection, even though the citation of no. 86, commenting on the subordination of the Magisterium to the Word of God, was a very important one. In his commentary on the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (i.e., DV 8), the then-young professor Joseph Ratzinger regretted that the traditional critical function of Scripture had not been treated in the Constitution. Unfortunately, neither does the Catechism deal with this theme, the significance of which is decisive for a clarification of the Council's statement regarding the subordination of the Magisterium to the authority of God's word. In spite of the statements of the Catechism about the interpreta-

tion of Scripture, the Council's demand for the consideration of the intention of biblical authors and the literary genres of texts is not, in fact, mentioned (no. 110). But as a result it is not said that the relevance of the scholarly-theological interpretation of Scripture for its use in the Church and her Magisterium is at stake. In addition, it lacks a statement to the effect that revelation has testified authoritatively to the content of Scripture in full and hence for all time, so that the later tradition can have an additional function only as interpretational authority. That is an ecumenically meaningful reality concerning which a far-reaching understanding in theological communication has been achieved, but which the Catechism has not, unfortunately, established.

The characteristic feature of faith as assent and the concept of the obedience of faith [Glaubensgehorsams] (no. 143) stand out among the Catechism's statements about faith as a human response to the revelation of God (nos. 142-74). There is no objection to that, although the latter concept is in need of interpretation. A misunderstanding of the expression, in the sense of an uncritical subordination to expert authority, should have been repudiated, but regrettably was not. In this connection the Protestant Christian lacks a reference to the meaning of faith as trust in God and his Word. Only in the summary statements at the end of this chapter does the keyword "trust" appear (no. 177), but it does so only with regard to the person who testifies to the truth, not with regard to God and the meaning of promise, or the salvific meaning of proclaimed truth itself.

In the subsequent interpretation of the profession of faith according to the Apostles' Creed, the first article of Christian faith in God the Creator and the church's doctrine of the Trinity are set forth, in spite of all shortage of explanations. The section does not restrict itself to the mere stringing together of fragmentary quotations from magisterial depositions. Neither, though, is there material progress on the problematic points where, in the light of modern interpretation of Scripture, traditional formulations of church doctrine would be in need of critical revision.

In the doctrine of the Trinity, at any rate, the equal rights of the doctrine of Eastern Orthodox Churches concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father (cf. John 15:6) with that of the Western doctrine of the Spirit's procession from both Father and Son have been left behind (no. 248). However, there is no indication of a taking back of the insertion of the latter formulation, carried out one-sidedly in the West in the ecumenical confession of Constantinople (381) and the condemnation of the Orthodox doctrine by the western Council of Lyons (1274) (DS 850). Rather, this medieval conciliar declaration is cited as an

authoritative document of doctrine (no. 248), although in 1974 Pope Paul VI clearly relativized it in a letter to Cardinal Willebrands.

With regard to the Genesis story the Catechism holds firmly to the historicity of the primitive biblical narrative (no. 374ff.), without going on to deal with the theological exegesis which, in accordance with the demand of the Second Vatican Council, takes into account the form of this narrative—a form which is viewed as saga [Sage] and therefore not as historical reportage. Also joined to the historicizing of the idea of a happy original state of humankind before the Fall is the adherence to the idea that all humans are descended from only one parental couple (no. 360). The Catechism is still not ready to admit the time-conditionedness of these ideas of traditional teaching and to recognize the independence of the Christian doctrine of the universality of sin from the idea of a historical primitive state. Thus for the time being it continues to burden our contemporaries who are willing to believe in spite of these unnecessary difficulties. That also goes for the treatment of the Fall as a "primeval event, which took place at the beginning of the history of humankind" (no. 390), and which brought an end to the happy original state mentioned previously. Such historicizing would hardly be fit to supply the plausibility, particularly necessary today, of the crucial Christian doctrine of Original Sin. In the treatment of the consequences of Original Sin the view that the corruption of sin "has destroyed" human freedom is attributed incidentally and erroneously to the reformers (no. 406). The Reformational doctrine denies sinners' freedom to restoration only with regard to their relationship to God, but not with regard to their freedom in relationship to finite things (cf. CA 18). In other places, however, the Catechism presents fine statements about the biblical representation of humankind, such as their creation in the image of God, which serves as the basis of human dignity (no. 357, cf. 457ff.), and the relational reciprocity of man and woman which marks a mutual "for each other" (371). Still the latter point could have been won through the consideration of corresponding statements of the New Testament (like Eph. 5:21ff.) which, through an emphasis on reciprocity, contain a clear correction of the claim to a one-sided subordination of women to men.

In the Catechism's expositions concerning faith in Jesus Christ there is an attempt, more so than in prior sections, to pin down an interpretation for the modern reader. The statements of traditional christological doctrine cited in the text are situated within the framework of a coherent interpretation and are not simply catalogued as doctrinal declarations. In the statements concerning the virginity of Mary, though, the doubt about the historicity of the tradition is treated all too superficially (no. 498), without mentioning that this doubt is supported by the form of the bib-

lical text itself which, according to the instruction of the Second Vatican Council, must be heeded in exegesis (DV 12.2, cf. above at no. 110).³ The interpretation of the ecclesiastical tradition concerning the "ever-virgin" Mary is thus highly doubtful (nos. 499-501), treated as though it were not a symbolic expression about the relationship of Mary to God. but rather as a historical fact. Thus it is possible, under the title "The Mysteries of Christ's Life" (nos. 512-70), to combine the historical and the unhistorical in the earthly life of Jesus, without pointing out the problematic of such a combination to the reader. On the other hand, the subsequent arguments concerning the cross and resurrection of Jesus move perfectly along the lines of historical-critical exegesis. That also goes particularly for the remarks about the conflict concerning Jesus which led to his condemnation, as well as to the involvement of the Jewish authorities in the trial of Jesus which does not, however, substantiate a collective responsibility on the part of the Jewish people for the death of Jesus (no. 597). The section regarding the "Self-Sacrifice of Jesus" (nos. 606ff.)⁴ represents a high point of the entire work, for here modern exegesis is truly taken into account in that the sacrifice of Jesus is not portrayed as reconciliatory propitiation of the Father, not limiting it to the crucifixion, but rather as Jesus' whole way of life-devotion [Lebenshingabe] to the plan which he received from the Father for the salvation of humankind (nos. 606f.), which certainly culminates in the crucifixion. Unfortunately this correction to the Church's doctrinal tradition is not mentioned. All the same, the application of this sacrificial understanding to the last supper of Jesus as the anticipation of his submissive life [Lebenshingabe] (no. 610) and statements regarding our participation in the sacrifice of Christ (no. 618) represent the groundwork for later official pronouncements about the Eucharistic sacrifice as a spiritual memorial of the one sacrifice of Christ (nos. 1365ff.). These statements correspond to the findings of the most recent ecumenical understanding concerning this earlier, especially controversial theme among confessional churches. It is most encouraging to see that the Catechism has accepted this breakthrough in ecumenical dialogue which is now also, so to speak, ecclesiastically official. I also rank the explanations of the resurrection of Jesus (nos. 638–58), particularly the emphasis on the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection (no. 649 and no. 643), alongside the positive recognition of the Catechism's statements regarding the second article of the Creed. These statements could have been considerably weightier still had the Catechism showed greater impartiality in other places, even by acknowledging the legendary features of the biblical traditions. Thus in this way one also misses in the following section corresponding allusions to the theme of Christ's ascension: Jesus' ascension and resurrection in the New Testament are, for the

most part, closely knit together as a single event which is separated only in Luke by the idea that Jesus roamed the earth for an additional forty days.

Explanations concerning the third article of faith⁶ begin with helpful statements about the varied works of the Holy Spirit. With regard to the assertions about the mystery of the church (nos. 770ff.) and the universal sacrament of salvation (nos. 774ff.) one would have hoped that here the Catechism would support the formulations of the Second Vatican Council, which stem from the biblical data (Col. 1:25-27 and 2:2; cf. Eph. 1:9f.; 3:4), that Christ is the mystery of salvation, that is, the content of the divine plan of salvation for humankind in which the church participates insofar as she is "in Christ." Unfortunately this important fact for the confessional understanding about the relationship of the church and Christ has not been clarified. On the other hand, the Protestant Christian can also, without any fuss, follow explanations concerning the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. That applies similarly to explanations about the unity of the church (nos. 813ff.), above all to remarks about the injured unity of the church due to the schisms of Christendom and about the necessary movement toward unity (nos. 817-22). Happily, this ecumenical openness on the subject of the catholicity of the church has been preserved by treating present-day churches, still not associated with Rome, as belonging to the one catholic church. The temptation to narrow, confessional leadership in this important topic has, to a large extent, been avoided. The Council's notion that the schisms of the church result in a restriction of the full catholicity of even the Roman Catholic Church is, unfortunately, only mentioned in passing, to say the least (no. 855). Where one would have expected the treatment of missionary work in connection with the apostolic mission to appear sooner, the apostolicity of the church is referred to instead, chiefly its communion with the apostolic origin (nos. 857f.) and the succession of bishops in the office of the Apostle [Peter] (nos. 861f.). Unfortunately, in subsequent remarks about the "hierarchical constitution" of the church (nos. 874ff.) the difficult ecumenical theme of the differences between separate churches in regard to ecclesial ministry does not come to expression. On the other hand, in the interpretation of the formula "communion of saints" (nos. 946ff.) the Protestant reader is likely to miss a reference to the meanings of "communion of believers" which is significant for the Protestant understanding of the church (CA 7), even though the New Testament basis of these ideas is mentioned (nos. 949f.).

To conclude this presentation a few comments should be made on the three remaining parts of the Catechism which, unfortunately, cannot be treated here with the same comprehensiveness as the fundamental themes of common faith for the ecumenical communion of Christians.

The second part on "The Celebration of the Christian Mystery" begins with a very rich introduction on the connection of the liturgy, that is, the church's life of worship, with faith. In subsequent explanations about the concept of the sacrament, the connection of sacraments to the one paschal mystery of Christ is admittedly stressed, but it has not been made clear how it has come from this New Testament idea of mysterion to the restricted idea of the sacrament, on to later denotations of sacramental acts. The criterion of the sacraments instituted by Christ (no. 1114, no. 1131) was determined first by medieval theology. That is mentioned just as infrequently as the confessional difference with regard to the number of sacraments, which arises from the varying use of this criterion: if one follows the criterion of the sacraments instituted by Christ quite strictly, namely as a requirement of an explicit institution relevant to the activity of Christ as specified in the biblical texts, then one arrives at only two or three sacraments. The Catechism, however, assumes as a matter of course the sevenfold number of sacraments (no. 1210). It is surprising that in individual passages not only are baptism and confirmation combined together as "sacraments of Christian initiation," but also that the Eucharist is reckoned among them. That baptism and confirmation were originally one sacrament is, to be sure, acknowledged as a historical fact (no. 1290). But the corresponding question which has disquieted theology since the Middle Ages is passed over; that is, how confirmation, which was separated from baptism in the early medieval period, would be recognized as a sacrament instituted in the New Testament by Christ as one of his own. The laying on of hands (no. 1288), which is mentioned in connection with baptism in the Acts of the Apostles and the Letter to the Hebrews, is itself plainly related to baptism. In the New Testament the gift of the Spirit, which the Catechism links to confirmation, belongs distinctively to Christian baptism. In its interpretation of the Creed⁷the Catechism has mentioned that the forgiveness of sins in the New Testament is linked to faith and baptism (no. 977). The question which arises from this is rightly put in the treatment of repentance: why, then, a second sacrament of reconciliation after baptism? But in that case a first and second conversion is spoken about without mentioning that the New Testament is aware of only the first conversion, baptism, which holds definitively, hence the explicit rejection of a second conversion in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 6:4-6). In the second and third centuries the church gave good reasons for exceptions in order to introduce a second repentance, but one should not conceal the problems of a biblical argument for it.

The topic of justification, which is related to repentance and baptism, is treated strangely enough in the third part of the Catechism (nos. 1987ff.). Here, unfortunately, the Reformational doctrine of justification and the centuries-long confessional opposition to it is just as little mentioned as the fact that it is precisely this central point in the last decades which has given the ecumenical understanding much headway. The Council of Trent's doctrine of justification is cited in this way (no. 1993) as though it did not pose any ecumenical problem on this point. More astonishing still is the treatment of indulgences as an object of church doctrine without any mention of the fact that this doctrine and the corresponding practice provided for Luther's criticism of the Church, the rejection of which caused the division of Western Christendom.

The third part about "Life in Christ" begins with an impressive chapter on the dignity of human beings, which is based on their creation in the image of God. The principal formative remarks of this third part on the Christian life-style modeled after the Ten Commandments have become the object of intense criticism in many a first reaction to the Catechism, not least of all with regard to its statements on sexual ethics. Even if such a criticism on individual points may be legitimate, the effort to develop outlines and standards of a specifically Christian life-style, which deliberately differs from the reigning behavior patterns of secular culture, deserves recognition. Even Protestant churches must place themselves in this task, which they have still hardly done. Incidentally, in this area the ecumenical community should have given it even more recognition.

Fortunately, with regard to the subject matter of the last part of the Catechism, "Christian Prayer," such ecumenical commonality is readily available, as in other areas of church life. Even the Protestant Christian can adopt explanations of this final part of the Catechism, with a few exceptions—for example, statements about the invocation of the Mother of God (nos. 2673ff.). The detailed interpretation of the "Our Father" is particularly helpful even for the Protestant Christian. Unfortunately, in the treatment of the topic of "prayer" no reference is made to the significance of common prayers for the growing ecumenical community of Christians. The discourse is not explicitly about prayer for the unity of the church. But when we utter the Lord's Prayer, "hallowed be your name, your kingdom come," we always pray even now for the unity of Christians and their restoration.

Endnotes

1. Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 1955 [sic: 1985], II B 4,

- as cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church [German trans.], 1993, 30f. [CCCB 1994, 6].
- 2. In the English translation of the Catechism the phrase as it appears here is found in no. 372 ("for each other"), although the meaning which the author intends appears in no. 371 (i.e., the phrase "for the other"). Trans.
- According to the assessment of most, even Catholic, exegetes, Luke 1:35 (cf. 32) in particular shows that the Lukan annunciation story, here already assumed, is a legendary explanation of the conviction about Jesus' sonship.
- 4. The section title of the English version of the Catechism is "Christ Offered Himself to His Father for Our Sins." Trans.
- 5. By "the second article of the Creed" the author means those parts of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed which deal with the person and work of Christ. See CCCB 1994, 50. Trans.
- 6. By "the third article of faith" the author means those parts of the Apostles' Creed and (particularly the elaborations of) the Nicene Creed which deal with the person and work of the Holy Spirit. See CCCB 1994, 50. Trans.
- 7. This refers to the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed which are cited in the Catechism as "The Credo" ("I believe"). See CCCB 1994, 50. Trans.

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