

CARINA MATEI DANIELA DUMULESCU

PAUL SILADI ADRIAN OPRE

ON FAITH AND MEANING-MAKING: A PSYCHO-THEOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE

Carina Matei

Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Applied
Cognitive Sciences Doctoral School, Cluj, Romania

Email: carinamatei@psychology.ro

Daniela Dumulescu

Lucian Blaga University, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Sibiu, Romania.

Email: daniela.dumulescu@ulbsibiu.ro

Paul Siladi

Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Cluj, Romania.

Email: paul.siladi@ubbcluj.ro

Adrian Opre

Babes Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Psychology
Department, Cluj, Romania.

Email: adrianopre@psychology.ro

Abstract: Faith and meaning-making are essential for improving well-being and building healthy personalities. Through inductive thematic analysis, we aimed to capture the particular nuances of meaning-making in a sample of Orthodox Christian religious emerging adults from Romania. The present research takes into consideration cultural and social aspects, that were explored through in-depth interviews. By following a thematic analysis protocol, we immersed ourselves in the religious and spiritual reality of these emerging adults. Following the protocol for our inductive analysis, we reviewed the research literature on these topics. Thus, we begin with the presentation of the existing literature on the main concepts and the implications of our focus on emerging adulthood. We continue with the qualitative research and the presentation of the main theme and subthemes that have emerged. Lastly, connections were made between positive and negative religious coping and the implications for psychological well-being during emerging adulthood and the impact later in life. The practical implications are discussed both for psychological aid specialists (e.g., psychological counselors, psychotherapists) and theological aid professionals (e.g., confessor priest or spiritual director). We argue that this research could further develop the dialogue and collaboration between psychological and theological specialists.

Key words: emerging adulthood, meaning-making, religiosity, spirituality, religious coping, well-being, Orthodox Christians.

1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a developmental period (Arnett 2000) characterized by a series of major turning points in one's life. This starts once adolescence has ended, at around 18 years old. It generally involves new beginnings such as separation from family and going to college (Arnett, Žukauskienė & Sugimura 2014). Usually, in the years to come, more major life events take place (e.g., starting and ending romantic relationships, career pursuits, starting and ending friendships, etc.). These events gradually shape the individual for adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a period mostly encountered in developed countries, where we can see a delay in making major life decisions (Arnett 2011, 2014). A way to describe this period is “the feeling in-between” (Arnett 2014, 158). It is not adolescence because of the increased autonomy, but not altogether adulthood due to the need for financial support and postponement of marriage, childbearing, and entering the workforce (Arnett 2014). Emerging adults have time to practice decision-making regarding their future, and also invest in knowing themselves. This was not that common or even possible about 50 years ago when young individuals were pressured by society to start working and have a family (Arnett 2014). Nowadays these decisions have been pushed to adulthood. The research literature emphasizes the benefits of this new developmental period in the quality of one's life in the next developmental stages. This is the case especially if the individual manages to address some important questions that continue to exist from adolescence: *Who am I?* (i.e., identity) and *Why am I here?* (i.e., meaning in life). As a result of the major changes that take place in their lives, emerging adults struggle to find the meaning behind these events. This meaning-making process is associated with positive adjustments later in life (McLean & Pratt 2006; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten & Bowman 2001). If one fails to find meaning in his or her life, there is an increased risk for unhealthy outcomes (e.g., substance abuse, consumerism, civic and social disengagement, unfulfilling relationships, etc.; Lin & Shek 2021; Nia & Mashhadi 2018; Smith 2011). Also, when emerging adults are facing various life stressors, they use a variety of coping strategies to manage their stress; an option, especially for people coming from a religious background, is religious coping (Ano & Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament 1997).

To capture the various nuances of the process of meaning-making, it is of major importance to understand the religious and spiritual aspects. Some of the research on these topics might not capture the authentic experiences of youth, due to the methodology that is used. Thus, a large part of the research literature could lack some contextual aspects (Smith 2009). For example, when looking at the methodology often used in research, we come across correlational studies on large samples of

participants. Also, when measuring religiosity/spirituality, often a two-item scale is being used to determine whether one believes oneself to be religious or not (Hill & Pargament 2008). This type of research has its important contributions but tends to lack insight into the motives, processes, and personal contexts that explain the results (Marks & Dollahite 2011). Thus, a qualitative approach to such topics is useful to shed some light on the various nuances of emerging adulthood, meaning-making, and cultural aspects.

Due to the recency of this developmental period being recognized in psychology, the literature is scarce when it comes to studying it in relation to various aspects such as culture and religiosity (Abo-Zena & Ahmed 2014). Adding to this, according to McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena (2014, 5) “scholars in the fields of psychology and human development recognize that the process of meaning-making is a central, yet overlooked aspect of human behavior” (Holden & Vittrup 2009; Tarakeshwar Stanton, & Pargament 2003; as cited in McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena 2014, 5). Also, the majority of the research that does exist usually comes from North American populations. Thus, the general image of these concepts tends to lack nuances and diversity.

In the present paper, we seek to explore and describe the process of meaning-making in relation to the religious and spiritual experiences of a group of Orthodox Christian-Romanian emerging adults. We start by defining the main concepts, continue by presenting the results of inductive qualitative research, and conclude with the relation to religious coping. The practical and theoretical implications are discussed, both for psychological and pastoral counseling.

2. Conceptual clarifications

Religiosity/spirituality. When it comes to finding a definition for religiosity and spirituality (R/S), the psychological community has developed several operationalizations (for a review of the most popular approaches see Seligman & Peterson 2004). One of the more popular ones is the religious orientation measurement looking at intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity (for quantitative scales of measurement see Allport & Ross 1967; Hoge 1972; Feagin 1964). For example, Allport & Ross (1967) define *intrinsic religiousness* as one’s personal effort to act per their beliefs and faith while also focusing more on the private aspects of religious life. *Extrinsic religiousness* is the external component, one’s involvement in public, observable rituals of worship that correspond to his or her faith.

Another popular approach is the one distinguishing between religiosity and spirituality (Hill et al. 2000). According to Hill and colleagues (2006), spirituality has differentiated itself from religion and

religiosity, while keeping a couple of elements from them. Religiosity can be seen as being more related to the religious institution (Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott 1999). Spirituality appears to become the preferred term for one's personal, subjective and transcendental experience (Spilka & McIntosh 1996). Zinnbauer and colleagues (1997), aimed to compare the group of participants that identified themselves as being *spiritual, but not religious*, to the one that identified as being *spiritual and religious*. The results showed that the first group tended to view religiosity in a negative light. They did not engage in traditional religious behaviours such as attending church and following strict rules from their religion, while the latter did the opposite.

Sheldrake (1995) suggests in his writings, that seeing religiosity as being separated from spirituality is a result of human consciousness and historical and cultural events. He argues that these affect people's way of viewing divinity. The implication of this is that we need to explore what *religiosity* and *spirituality* mean for each generation, to have a better understanding of *their* understanding of the concept.

Meaning-making. This concept has been researched concerning religiosity and spirituality, by using various operationalizations of the concepts. From the research literature, we can see more and more evidence that religiosity is related to increased well-being in various life domains (George, Ellison, & Larson 2002; Steger & Frazier 2005; Ryff 2014; Zhang, Pal, Tam, Lee, Ong & Tiew 2018). According to Steger & Frazier (2005), religion appears to contribute to the process of finding meaning in life. Religion feeds the individual with strength and meaning, through its effects on one's values and goals in life (Pargament & Mahoney 2005). It has been argued that how one pursues religion can be influenced by meaning-making, and, at the same time, the sense of meaning can be shaped by religion (Brown, Lu, Marks & Dollahite 2011). Also, meaning-making is argued to be a salient path to pursue the sacred, and "in a transactional manner religion also shapes individuals' ideology, lifestyles, well-being, and sense of meaning in life" (Brown et al. 2011, 15).

Religious coping. Coping, according to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), is viewed as a process through which one might try to understand and tackle personal or situational demands of a greater significance in one's life. Pargament (1990, 1998, 2001) got into detail in understanding the relationship between religion and coping. Religious coping styles can be operationalized in more than one way. There are the three religious coping styles: (1) *collaborative style*, when one believes that a problem can be solved in collaboration with the divinity; (2) *self-directing style*, where one believes that problems are solved alone, without the help of the divinity and (3) *deferring style*, in which one expect and rely on the divinity to solve the problem (Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman & Jones 1988). Also, there is the dichotomic operationalization into positive versus negative coping styles, where *positive* include spiritual

connection and support, religious forgiveness, perceiving the divinity as a partner in solving problems and focusing on the divinity's goodness. While the *negative* one involves perceiving negative events as punishments from the divinity, passively expecting the divinity to intervene in one's life through miracles, and attributing negative outcomes to the devil (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez 1998).

Relationship to emerging adulthood. Arguably, emerging adults contemplate their view of the world (Arnett 2000), thus by default religiosity, spirituality, and meaning in life are considered (Barry & Abo-Zena 2014). During this developmental period, emerging adults' exploration is supported by their physical development (e.g., neural level, Maselko 2013), which supports more complex cognitive and emotional development as well (e.g., cognitive-affective flexibility, Labouvie-Vief 2006). Also, besides the internal developments, there are the external ones. Emerging adults encounter new situations, people, and various challenges as they go through life. They might struggle to find the meaning behind these challenges and cope with stressful situations.

In our research, we did not aim to apply a certain paradigm of defining religiosity and spirituality, but rather see how it comes up organically in the discourse of a small group of Orthodox Christian Romanian emerging adults. The closest approach to ours would be the one offered by Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones & Shafranske (2013). According to them, emerging adults' religious and spiritual development can be defined as a process of meaning-making intended to aid the search for the sacred in a manner that may or may not involve religious institutions (Pargament et al. 2013). We expect that meaning-making can have both protective and promotive effects on this group of emerging adults. Thus, meaning-making may also be implicated in positive and negative life views and coping.

Cultural context. According to Pickel (2009), Romania is one of the most religious nations in Europe. This is supported by data from the World Values Survey where we can see an increase in people's self-classification as being religious. In 1990, 74% of individuals reported having a belief in the divine, while in 2003 the percentage increased to 93%. Also, when looking at the European Values Survey, the level of trust in religious institutions increased from 72% in 1990 to 86% in 2008 (Müller 2011). When looking at Europe, the increase of religiosity seems to be in the post-communist countries that have not gone through a large modernization process. Also, for Romania, there is a relationship between national identity and religion, especially for the Orthodox Christian faith.

3. Inductive qualitative research

We opted for inductive qualitative research in our attempt to capture the way emerging adults relate to religiosity and spirituality, from their personal points of view. For the present paper, we have selected a part of the main research. The research was guided by three research questions but in the present paper, we are focusing on the following explorative research question: *Is there a connection between religiosity, spirituality, and meaning-making from the perspective of Romanian Orthodox Christian emerging adults?*

Method. In relation to our objective, we conducted explorative, individual, in-depth interviews with emerging adults. The interviews were conducted by a single person, the main author of this research. We used an interview guide that was built in relation to our objective and research questions. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, we have used pseudonyms instead of real names.

Participants. The criteria of inclusion in this research were: (1) being baptized in the Orthodox Christian faith, (2) having a belief in the divine and its existence, and (3) being between 18-29 years old. Six people were included in this research ($M_{age}=23$ years old, $N=5$ female). Other demographical information: urban and rural areas (84% were from urban areas), level of education (16% high-school diploma, 16% bachelor's degree, 68% masters' degree), and college specialization (16% vocational high-school, 16% economy, 16% foreign language, 52% law). They were recruited through social media and word of mouth, by using the snowball method (Ellsberg & Heise 2005). Participation was voluntary, no incentives were given. More information about the participants can be found in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Demographic data about participants

Participant	Demographic data
Participant 1	23-year-old female, with a medium socio-economic status and high-school diploma from a vocational school
Participant 2	23-year-old female, with a medium socio-economic status and a BA in economy
Participant 3	24-year-old female, with a medium socio-economic status and a BA in law, at the time of the research she was studying for a MA degree in law
Participant 4	25-year-old male, with a medium socio-economic status and a BA in law
Participant 5	23-year-old female, with a medium socio-economic status and a BA in law, at the time of the research she was studying for a MA degree in law

Participant 6 23-year-old female, with a medium socio-economic status and a BA in foreign languages, at the time of the research she was studying for a MA degree in foreign languages

Interview guide. The interview guide was elaborated in relation to the objective of this research, and it included several aspects related to faith. For the present paper, we have selected to research the following aspects: (1) the role that faith played in the participants' life; (2) the belief in a plan that the divinity might have for the participant; (3) in case the existence of a plan was believed to be true, what was the role that the individual might play in it and (4) the participants' perspective over the negative happenings in their lives (the word *injustice* was used). The interview was semi-structured and the interviewer encouraged an open discussion through the way the questions were formulated. Also, the interviewer's interventions were made to facilitate the conversation in a natural flow. Each participant was interviewed alone, in a location and date of their choosing. Each participant was informed about the purpose of the interview and a consent form was given. A digital recorder was used, and the interviews lasted for an average of 35 minutes. The content was later transcribed in a verbatim format, including the natural way of the participants' speaking and gesturing (e.g., nonverbal and paraverbal aspects such as the pauses in speech and main body signals were recorded; Poland 2002; Braun & Clarke 2006).

Data Analysis. We have used the thematic analysis according to Braun & Clarke (2006). The model involves six stages of analysis: (1) familiarizing with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) the revision of themes; (5) naming and defining the themes and (6) writing the final report in detail. We used emic coding, having a bottom-up data-driven approach. We sought to extract conceptual schemas and categories that can be considered to be relevant and appropriate by the natives of the culture whose faith and behaviours we have studied (Lett 1990). This can be seen in the naming of the themes.

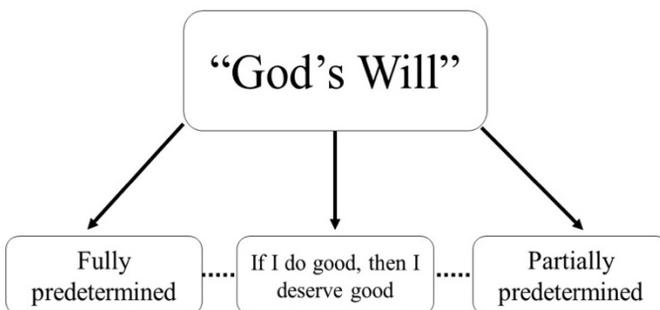


Fig. 1. Thematic map "God's Will"

Concerning our aim and research question presented above, we revised the data and one major theme emerged. We have named this theme by using the words most of the participants organically used when speaking of a plan for one's life (see Figure 1). The major theme "God's Will" was shared by five out of the six participants. It consists of the belief that there are some "plans", and "ordinances" that the divinity has in store for the humans on this Earth. The extracts from the data that support this theme are presented. For example, Participant 5: "So, nothing happens without a reason, everything happens because of God's will. It happens for a certain reason, with a certain aim. I always search to see what that reason is and that is how every day new conclusions add up, you know? And, somehow, everything that I believe is the sum of conclusions that I have made for a long time, you know? [Conclusions] that I have been making for a long time."

Similarly, Participant 4 stated the following: "...there is someone up there, making all the connections for you"; "[things] were meant to happen that way"; "it was meant to be".

Participant 2 was the only one not to share the view with the others: "No... it makes no sense... I do not believe [there is a plan]. No...I do not."

When asked whether they believed what their role was in this plan of divinity, the participants' responses split into two categories. On one hand, two participants believed that God's will is fully predetermined, there is the subtheme of *God's Will - Fully predetermined*. They believed that from the moment that we are born, everything is established and set. Humans cannot change it; everything is being decided by divinity. In the word of Participant 3: "No matter how much I tried, it was not meant for me to go there. [...] God did not allow for me to go until... He did not feel that I was ready, or that I have to be there."

On the other hand, three participants believed that there was a plan for them from the moment they are born, but they still maintained a sense of autonomy and agency. The divinity does intervene in their lives from time to time to remind them of salvation. They believed they can choose between several options and ways to solve various situations in their lives. For example, Participant 5 stated: "Well... I do have a choice from what He gives me, for me to be redeemed. I mean, I can choose between being a lawyer, a judge... or you know, [I can choose to] work hard for something. And in case that something is not the best thing for me, God will show me."

Then as well, Participant 6 stated this idea clearly: "Somehow half of it can be this thing [God's will], but also half of it depends on what you choose to do."

And finally, the third subtheme emerged from the data - "*If I do good, then I deserve good*". This theme appears as the core belief these participants share. A belief that "doing good" is the purpose of the whole

existence, according to the teachings of divinity. In the words of Participant 5, we can have a better understanding of what “good” means: “For example, after you take the Eucharist and...aaa...when you feel all the joy. I mean, with every small joy, you start to feel joyful, be content with anything! And the joy that you feel is...extraordinary. [...] That is how you receive God in you. And you feel...mercy and start to empathize with a lot of people. [...] And it is not just me, I mean for my salvation. Salvation is not individual in my view. I mean...only through others, I have realized that I can be redeemed only through others. I...that’s...that’s how it is! [...] this is the way of doing things, this is the plan. [As I start my day] I say my prayers first of all, then do sports, learn and try, all the while, through everything that I do, to bring joy to others and help them.”

Further, Participant 4 expressed: “I feel that I do not deserve [anything] if I do not offer. [If you] do a lot of good, it comes back.”

This being inductive research, it guided us in our steps, and the connections with the literature were made once the data analysis was completed. Thus, in the next part, we discuss the main results concerning the existing research literature.

4. Conclusions

In our research, we aimed to explore how religiosity, spirituality, and meaning-making are brought up organically in the discourse of a small group of Orthodox Christian Romanian emerging adults. Our explorative research question was: *Is there a connection between religiosity, spirituality, and meaning-making from the perspective of Romanian Orthodox Christian emerging adults?* The results presented here are in accordance with the view of Pargament and colleagues (2013). Five out of six participants’ religious and spiritual development can be defined as a process of meaning-making intended to aid the search for the sacred. In trying to understand the challenges that they have encountered so far, they thought of a divine plan (i.e., the main theme of “God’s Will”). Our results are consonant with two approaches to the study of religious and spiritual life (Seligman & Peterson 2004):

- (1) We explore the cognitive and emotional dimensions of R/S, aiming to explore the way meaning is being made;
- (2) We discuss the implications of R/S at a functional level, by addressing the implications of R/S in psychological coping.

Both subthemes *Fully predetermined* and *Partially predetermined* have cognitive depths that can be supported by the emotional, moral and cognitive development (i.e., abstract reasoning) of emerging adults (Smith & Snell 2009; Barry, Nelson, Davarya & Urry 2010; Mustea, Negru & Opre

2010). These subthemes can be connected to these emerging adults' coping styles. On one hand, they can find an explanation for how things came to be in their lives by relating the events to religious and spiritual beliefs. For example, they can reinterpret failure as a message from the divinity that it "was not meant to be" for them, for the divinity's plan for their redemption (e.g., see Participant 5). According to Pargament and colleagues (1998), when the stressor is being reinterpreted through religion as a benevolent and potential beneficial act from divinity, we exercise positive religious coping.

The other side of the coin though could be the issue of perceived control and autonomy over one's life. The belief that one has no control over his or her life is associated with mixed mental and physical health correlates (Pargament et al. 1998; Bickel, Odum & Madden 1999). This can result in having a belief that the divinity or devil has more control over one's life and can influence the outcome more than the individual. For example, one can conclude that the divinity has abandoned him/her or punished him/her – thus creating a strained and stressful relationship with the divine and clergy. As a result, emerging adults who share the belief that the final meaning and purpose is salvation, but the road there is completely out of their control, are more at risk to develop negative religious coping. Having dysfunctional beliefs facilitates negative religious coping. The distress can be increased and well-being decreased because they can feel helpless.

Also, by relating our data (see subtheme "*If I do good, I deserve good*") to the literature, we can see the emergence of altruism and positive relations with others (e.g., see Participants 4 and 5). In terms of religious coping, this classifies as religious helping (Pargament et al. 1998) and in the Christian faith, this is one of the major teachings: to do good. These can involve emotional self-regulation through positive religious coping – thus contributing to their increased well-being and mental health (Cole 2005, Smith & Snell 2009). In this subtheme, "*If I do good, I deserve good*" we can observe a major source of meaning in their lives, that is in direct relation to their faith. The final purpose in life is salvation, emerging adults adapt their cognitions, behaviours, and emotion regulation strategies in order to achieve that. Also, from a psychological point of view, this other orientation in a religious faith contributes to healthy moral development (Glanzer, Hill & Robinson 2015). Thus, considering all participants have this subtheme in common, it could be a strength for those more inclined towards positive religious coping. At the same time, a starting point for the others, to transit from negative to positive religious coping.

To sum up, from a developmental point of view, emerging adults are prepared to explore and evolve in finding their own meaning. The current research captures the particular nuances of the culture and context that which they are living in. The accent is falling on them placing the divinity and their faith as being central to their existence. These nuances are a

result of our attempt at emersion through in-depth interviews, with the religious and spiritual reality of these emerging adults. This is an important aspect, considering that meaning-making and identity formation does not take place in isolation, but through interaction with one's development and context (Barry & Abo-Zena 2014).

This nuanced understanding of religiosity, spirituality, meaning-making and coping styles in emerging adults can have important practical implications for various specialists who work with emerging adults (e.g., psychotherapy and psychological counseling specialists). To conduct a proper evaluation and construct an intervention plan, the specialist should be aware of the emerging adults' characteristics. From the literature review and our research, we can see that this could involve religious, spiritual, and faith dimensions as well. Even more so, a greater understanding of one's social and cultural nuances is needed and can be useful (Cinnirella & Loewenthal 1999; Abo-Zena & Ahmed 2014). In the literature, we see the risk of people not receiving help that is sensitive to these dimensions. For example, Cinnierlla & Loewenthal (1999) have argued based on the results of their qualitative research, that people might retreat due to the stigma associated with mental health issues, leading to a preference for private coping strategies. Thus, not addressing these private coping strategies might raise issues for youth, as well as not having an evaluation sensitive to one's culture and faith. Therefore, we recommend that mental health practitioners extend their evaluation to include religious and spiritual beliefs, doubts, practices, and personal interpretation. As far as the intervention is concerned, trained specialists can address psychological well-being and also address aspects of perceived autonomy and control that emerging adults can develop. This is especially important during this developmental period because it precedes adulthood (Arnett 2011, 2014).

Moreover, we argue that an interdisciplinary approach between psychology and theology specialists could contribute to a more relevant approach for emerging adults that identify themselves as being religious. Some practitioners that do not have training on theological aspects, might find it challenging to address religious aspects (e.g., religious coping, religious sources of meaning). As a result, we conclude by including a theological perspective on the divine plan and its relation to one's life and meaning.

From a theological perspective, or, even better said, from the perspective offered by orthodox theological anthropology, humans are created as free beings. Human freedom is acting both regarding the created world, but also in a relationship with God. God has only one (self-imposed) limit, that is human freedom, which He would never trespass. This does not mean that the human beings are having absolute freedom, because they are subjected to a complex set of natural determinations; it only means that the human person does not have a crushing destiny, that

must be fulfilled without any escape possibility (like in the ancient Greek mythology, for example). God is calling each one to Him, and He is helping and accompanying them along the way. So, every man and woman can work together with God, and still be responsible for each of his actions. A faithful person is never alone, but with God, who is guiding and strengthening him, without taking away from him the accountability for his endeavours. The divine providence is what always brings a positive potential in the most tragic contexts.

In the same theological understanding, the human person is never entirely detached from his fellow humans or the entire creation. Human actions, both positive and negative, have an impact on community and creation and this is the reason why the human responsibility is universal, it reaches way beyond the personal level. Taking such a responsibility is a tremendous source of meaning-making, because if you do good, you will multiply the good in the world, and you will receive good. This perspective is crucial for pastoral counseling, because adequately taken into account, can be a very important source of hope and courage, especially in the most stressful life circumstances.

Finally, considering that during college years, emerging adults could benefit from various psychological and theological aid, we believe this research could further develop the dialogue and collaboration between these two domains, psychological and theological aid.

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