

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 8 December 2017



Drawn to the Gods: Religion, Comedy and Animated Television Programmes

Podcast with **David Feltmate** (11 December 2017).

Interviewed by **Breann Fallon**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/drawn-to-the-gods-religion-comedy-and-animated-television-programmes/>

Breann Fallon (BF): *If you were asked to name the TV programmes that were most religious, had the most religious content and references, which ones would you name? Seventh Heaven, maybe? Or Supernatural? Or perhaps Game of Thrones? Well, I was wondering how many of us would actually name The Simpsons, or Family Guy, or South Park. Because, did you know that 95% of Simpsons episode, 84% of Family Guy episodes and 78% of South Park episodes contain explicit religious references. These animated comedy shows are critically influential in teaching viewers about religious people and about religious institutions. The commentary created by the intersection between humour, satire and religion in these TV shows – and specifically their context of America, creates an interesting image of what is supposedly meant to be a good religious American. To discuss this topic today I have with me Associate Professor **David Feltmate**, the author of a fantastic new work entitled, [Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humour in the Simpsons, South Park and Family Guy](#). Dave is Associate Professor of Sociology at Auburn University at Montgomery. He received his PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Waterloo in 2011. His research areas include the Sociology of Religion, religion in popular culture, humour studies, social theory, new religious movements and religions and family. His book, Drawn to the Gods is available from New York University Press and is the topic of our discussion today. Thank you very much for joining us today, Dave.*

David Feltmate (DF): Thank you for having me.

BF: *So, I'm really interested in how this book came about. Why did you choose to write a book on The Simpsons, South Park and Family Guy?*

DF: So, this book really started in the winter of 2005. I was fresh out of my masters' degree at Wilfrid

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Laurier University. I was living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. And I was teaching sessionally, like a lot of people do. And I was teaching a course on religion and popular culture. And I had set the course up. We did a week on Christianity in popular culture. So we'd do a crash course in Christianity and then an example of Christianity in pop culture, or whatever. And what I realised was, these classes had 65 students in them each: I would have three students that really paid attention every day, five students who would tune in for the topic of the day, and most people were just kind-of there to get credit and they weren't paying attention. And I thought, well, Jeez there's a lot of really interesting and relevant pop culture stuff. But the way that I started to get them to listen was, I would start quoting Simpsons references at them at the front of the room. And at the time, in Canada, there was a Canadian comedian named [Brent Butt](#). And he said with a good cable package you can get three hours of The Simpsons every day. And he was pretty close to correct at that point in time. And so this stuff was just ubiquitous, everywhere. And that's what drew students back in. They knew these religious references but they had no understanding of the religious traditions at all. They were just coming in and experiencing it for the first time. Which led me . . . because I knew I was going to go on and do a PhD, which I did at the University of Waterloo. And I said, "Well, they've got to have learned something, what did they learn? What were they being taught through these jokes?" So that's what I went off to study. And so I wrote my dissertation on The Simpsons and that's sort-of, the very early awkward stages of the book that's there now. And my supervisor, [Doug Cowan](#), I remembered distinctly, one day he said, "OK. Your dissertation is done, but it's not a book yet. It needs comparative data." "Well," I said, "The obvious comparative data is South Park and Family Guy." And now they kind of look like legacy programmes, but that's where it came from. These shows were widely known, they were critically acclaimed and people are learning religious material from them. And I wanted to know what they were learning. And over time it evolved into: how were they learning this through humour? (5:00) Because a lot of the literature that I was reading on The Simpsons or South Park – there's still not much written on Family Guy – I just found that people did not ask the question: why are these things funny? They simply worked on the assumption that they were. But I know people that don't find them funny. So I had to ask, what is it about humour that enables people to transmit this information – transmit it in a humorous way – but why are they seeing these things as humorous? Because I know that some people are not going to. They're either not going to get the joke, or they don't think the joke is funny in the first place. So that's where this book comes from: from teaching and thinking about what it means to talk about religion and religious diversity through humour.

BF: *So in the book you talk about this idea of sort of using satire and comedy, and how that is*

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bringing religion to a broad audience, and this idea of broad commentary and how this is really teaching the general public about religious people and religious institutions. And I thought we could talk about some specific examples before we sort of talk about the general takeaways from the book. And there are some really interesting examples in the book. I personally like the ones from The Simpsons because – I don't think I watched every episode of the Simpsons, like you probably did, but I'm pretty close – I do really love the Simpsons. And I've watched a lot of Family Guy as well. I think it's really interesting that you say there's not a lot written on Family Guy, actually. Because I would have thought there would have been quite a lot on Family Guy, which is an interesting point on the side.

DF: Unless it's exploded in the last year or so after the book was finished, and it was out there, and I just kind of need a break from reading all of the literature. No there really wasn't a lot on Family Guy.

BF: *Well, there's a project for any RSP listeners who are looking for a little article to punch out there: Family Guy there for you! But I thought, maybe, we could start with your favourite example from any of the shows, maybe a new religious movement example? I thought maybe you could start with one of those?*

DF: Oh man! Do I have a favourite? I don't know if I have a favourite. I know I've watched “[Homer the Heretic](#)” the most, but that's not a new religious movements example. Well, it depends on how you define new religious movements.

BF: That's a great example anyway.

DF: Yes, well that's the classic. That's the sort of Simpsons' religion urtext from Season Four. And it used to be that I could pretty much close my eyes and see that entire episode playing out before me. So the reason that I really love that one is that it encapsulates so much of what would become the running narratives of religion in the Simpsons. There's this sort-of back and forth with Christianity. There's an open display of Hinduism and Judaism, and all of these different kinds of religious traditions that are on display, and a part of this – a part of Springfield but also a part of the American fabric. Which when you consider that that episode was released in what, '92 . . . ?

BF: *It's early.*

DF: I think it's '92. Well it's season four, but I want to say it's November '92. Just a second, I've got the book here. It's going to drive me nuts if I don't . . .

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BF: *The interesting thing about Homer the Heretic – correct me if I'm wrong, but that's the one where he eats the chilli isn't it?*

DF: No that is . . . the name is in Spanish and I can't remember, but it's “The Mysterious Voyage of Homer: [El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer](#)”. And that one is Season Eight. Yes, that one's a great one, too. I love Johnny Cash as the Coyote that offers spiritual wisdom. And Homer says, "Should I get rid of my possessions?" And the Coyote just laughs at him and says, "No. If anything you need more possessions. You don't even have a computer." **(10:00)** And, yeah, “Homer the Heretic” was '92.

BF: So what happens in “Homer the Heretic”?

DF: So in “Homer the Heretic”, Homer decides, "I don't want to go the Church," one day. And he has the best morning of his life, and he attributes it all to not going to church. But Marge has dragged the kids to Church, and so there becomes this marital strife between the two of them over Homer not going to church. He says he forms his own religion, and so he starts doing things like – one of my favourite examples is that he calls into work from the bar and says that he can't come in, because it's a religious feast day. And he looks up... They say "What feast day?" and he sees a sign that says "Maximum occupancy" and he says "Maximum Occupancy". “Click”. Those kinds of jokes really play on this ongoing sentiment in the United States that to be a good American you've got to be religious. And you see this come about all the time in political discourse in the USA, when people are talking about candidates. Atheists are among the most distrusted groups, in terms of large polls in the USA. And that's still today. And this part of the discourse and debate around Donald Trump, is that people can't figure out why Evangelicals continue to support, or came out to support Donald Trump when he's so opposed to the kinds of values that they claim to represent, certainly, in all of his actions and everything he espouses to. And The Simpsons was sitting there 25 years ago now, saying, “Hey, this is okay. It's okay for people to drop out of church.” Then God visits Homer in a dream and says to Homer, “You’ve forsaken my church.” And Homer says, “Well, I try to be a good person and I love my kids. I just want to sleep in on Sunday mornings.” And God listens to Homer for a minute, because Homer says, “Why should I spend every Sunday morning hearing about why I'm going to Hell?” And God goes “Hmm. You've got a point there. You know, some Sundays I'd rather just be watching football.” And Homer says, “So, I figure I should just try to live right and worship you in my own way.” And God says, “It's a deal!” and then ascends into Heaven. And that's really part of this larger spiritual-seeker narrative – the ability to pick and choose among different religious options – that has become part of the way that Sociologists of Religion, anyway, talk about the United States. And all of

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these religious options . . . Like, I live in a city of 200,000 people, roughly. And there are close to a thousand churches in the area. And if you don't like what's going on in one of them you can literally. . . . I mean, I went to Church this morning and there's a church across the street and another church in the parking lot. I was like: "It's church row over here!" And if I didn't like what was being said in my church, I could literally walk out the back door and in two minutes be in another service. And that's just among Christian denominations! At least, now, I live in the American south, so it's different than other parts of the country. The United States is different in its different regions. But that narrative of spiritual seeking, anyway, by the '90s had become part-and-parcel, part of the fabric of the United States of America. And that's what I like about "Homer the Heretic". It really introduces this spiritual-seeking – worshipping God in your own way, do what you want to do, that's fine, just don't try to impose it on anybody else – that I really found became the core of *The Simpsons*. So, I don't know if it's my favourite, because I love other episodes. I love "[The Joy of Sect](#)", which is the *Movementarians*, which is just such a great name for a new religious movement. And, as I show in the book there are all these kinds of quick visual references to numerous new religious movements. So it works really well as a display of the cult stereotype. (15:00) And in *South Park* the Blametologists, as well, are like that. And I really like to study that because again at the University of Waterloo I was working with Douglas Cowan and [Lorne Dawson](#). And people who study new religious movements would be familiar with those names. And I never went in to study new religious movements, I went in to do religion and popular culture, but I said, "Well I'm working with two of the top scholars in the world in new religious movements, I'd be an idiot not to pick this up and learn from them." And what I found was that these shows were able Let me go back here a second. If you go into a classroom now and you ask people what a cult is, they'll usually be able to give you some kind of idea, like it's a bad religion, it's a group of people who follow some leader and they don't think for themselves, they're often associated with dangerous kind of religions. And then I say, "OK, so you know all of this. How many of you have ever met somebody who's in a cult?" And nobody raises their hand. Or I shouldn't say that: I've had one person who knew somebody who was in a group that he considered a cult. And so I had to start asking, "Well, where you get this idea from?" And Joseph Laycock has a good article in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* on this as well, called "[Where do they get those ideas?](#)" So I don't want to steal Joe's thunder. What it was is, over time, these images and ideas about cults were repeated through mass media, through jokes, through television, to the point that you could create completely fictitious groups like the *Movementarians*, with numerous references to all of these other different groups like [Rajneeshpuram](#) is in there, certainly the [Unification Church](#). There's a mass marriage scene which is just I like to, in classes, take a picture of a Unification Church mass

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marriage, and that scene – just a screen shot – from The Simpsons and say, "Look! They're almost identical!" And what it was, it was able to play on a legacy of particular framing in terms of fear. So that now, generations who have never really encountered some of these movements have a heuristic with which to interpret them. So I thought that was really relevant. That's definitely one that I like.

BF: *This idea of, you know, the TV show being the lens through which a generation can interpret religious people and religious institutions . . . You said that the Simpsons was sort-of advocating this idea of spiritual-seeking. Do you think that's the same for South Park and Family Guy or do you think they advocate something different?*

DF: No, I think each one advocates its own thing. I think South Park is all about individual creativity.

BF: OK

DF: So, there's a couple of South Park episodes: "[Go God Go](#)" and "[Go God Go XII](#)", I think is the number. And that came out when Richard Dawkins released [The God Delusion](#), and it was a best seller. I think *The God Delusion* is really the book that made this sort of Four Horseman of the [New Atheists](#) movement with Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett who had books out before Dawkins and then Christopher Hitchens who had one out afterwards. But I think *The God Delusion* is really the book that broke the tidal wave for all four books to become this kind of marker in time. And when it came in the audio commentary [Trey Parker](#) and [Matt Stone](#) were talking about how Penn Jillett of [Penn and Teller](#) was saying, "You guys have got to come out as atheists," or whatever. And Trey Parker's going "But, I'm not an atheist. I don't necessarily believe in God the way that other theists do . . ." (20:00) But with South Park they don't like organised religions, but where individual creativity is promoted, enhanced, allowed to flourish through religious expression, they really don't have a problem with it. What they have a problem with are hypocrites, or people who say things that they just think are stupid. Right? So their feud with Scientology, versus how they treat Latter Day Saints, is a good example of that. The episode "[All about the Mormons](#)" from South Park, which has (sings) "Joseph Smith was called a prophet, dum dum dum dum dum." And dum dum dum eventually turns into "This whole thing is dumb dumb dumb dumb dumb!" But the Mormons are the nicest people ever to come to South Park. And at the end of the episode, the Mormon kid, Gary, just looks at Stan and says, "All I ever wanted to do was be your friend, but you were too high and mighty for that. You've got a lot of growing up to do, buddy." And I won't finish that quote because there might be children listening at home. That, compared to the Scientology episode, "[Trapped in the Closet](#)", which basically came out of . . . They were asking, "Can we say Tom Cruise is gay?" And they say, "Well, no. That would be

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libel.” “Well, can we put him in a closet and have him refuse to come out of the closet?” “Yeah, you could do that.” Well, they did that, but they also ended up making fun of Scientology at the same time. And they were just vicious towards Scientology, saying that it’s a big fat global scam. Well that’s because they see the two different religions very differently. They don’t think Scientology produces good people the way that the Latter Day Saints do. And that’s where you can find – in those comparative nuances – is where I think you can find the real standards that South Park puts out there. And Family Guy? Family Guy is atheist. [Seth MacFarlane](#) has come out as a very prominent voice in atheist circles and early on in the programme there was So, the first three seasons of Family Guy there’s more willingness to play with the possibility that religious identities might be good things. But by the time you hit about Season Six or Seven, all the religious traditions are treated as stupid, and in some cases, very dangerous.

BF: *That’s really interesting that the three project something completely different, because what people can take from them – you know, the images that they’re getting about religious people in religious institutions, that kind of broad commentary – is so varied. And that idea of, you know, spiritual-seeking is so varied. And one thing I found really interesting in the book were the examples about atheism and spiritual-but-not-religious in the three different TV shows. Because talking about, just then, the different, you know: The Simpsons as being spiritual-seeking and South Park as being this idea of creativity and then Family Guy as being atheist. Then their representation of atheism and as spiritual-but-not-religious in each show is very different. And I think it’s very interesting to see atheism and spiritual-but-not-religious in this context. Because I don’t necessarily know if it’s something that we see on TV a lot.*

DF: No. And for me one of the big things was So, I’m also trained as a Sociologist of Religion and in the United States, whenever a major survey of religious affiliation is released, so let’s say the [Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life](#) releases a major survey, it gets boiled down to “the number of Christians versus everybody else” in media play. (25:00) And one of the things that I was noticing, really early on, is there’s almost a fight in political and popular culture in the United States over who owns the “unaffiliated”; who the unaffiliated are. Even that term is a problem because it assumes that they’re not just being themselves and their own distinct group, just like Christians and Jews and Muslims. And if you start looking at American religious statistics, there’s a couple of thousand different denominations that get lumped into different families for statistical purposes. But there was this real question, and I saw this coming from New Atheists, people like Domar, where he would claim that people who weren’t affiliated with religion were somehow atheists like him. And I started

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looking at the numbers and looking at what people in those groups were saying, and I went, “You know, spiritual-but-not-religious is really a catch-all category for all kinds of stuff.” In terms of what people are doing on the ground, it's a very creative place, where two people would say, “Well, I'm spiritual, but not religious,” and the grounds you would have to compare what they're doing is the fact that they both say, “I'm spiritual, but not religious.” And I think *The Simpsons* in one way, and *South Park* in another way, kind of capture that. And how they treat atheism in all three programmes is also distinct, right? Like *South Park* tends to treat atheists like they would other religious extremists. In one episode, “[Red Hot Catholic Love](#)”, which is on one hand about the Catholic sexual abuse scandals that were coming out of Boston at the time when that episode was released. When the people in town find out that the kids are being abused in the Catholic Church – not in the local Catholic Church but in the Catholic Church over all – they all decide to quit and become atheists. And one of the sub-plots in that episodes is that Cartman discovers that if you stuff food up your butt, you end up pooping out your mouth. And so, long story short, all the atheists, basically The surgeon general says, “Oh yes, this is a much healthier way to eat.” So all the atheists start shoving food up their butt and crapping out their mouths. And one of the punchlines in the episode is, Father Maxi, the Catholic priest says, “You just sit around spewing a bunch of crap out of your mouths”, while one of the atheist is busy literally crapping out his mouth. And that really, I think, is one of *South Park*'s attacks on atheism: they see it as too extreme. Going back to “Go God Go XII”, there's really this sense that They've got this race of enlightened sea otters in the future and the Wise One comes out and says about Richard Dawkins, and I'm paraphrasing here: “He had some great ideas but that doesn't mean that he was correct on everything. Maybe, just believing in God makes God exist.” And then all the other otters gang up and kill him. And in the future, you know atheists in those episodes, atheists are at war with each other over what all the atheists should call themselves. So it's not like atheism solves the problem of religious violence, which is what a lot of atheists were claiming at the time – or at least prominent ones. So, yes. For me, anyway, in terms of writing the book, it was thinking about the ways that we can get people to think about atheists as atheists, and people who say they're spiritual-but-not-religious as spiritual-but-not-religious. And maybe there's some overlap in individuals, but maybe these should be two sort-of separate categories in the way that we start thinking about religious groups and publics, certainly within the United States. And you could speak better for the Australian situation than I can.

BF: (30:00) *I think we probably should take a moment to talk about We've had all these really great examples about the different sort-of faiths in the TV shows that you bring up in the book. And I think there's a lot that we could take away from the book as Religious Studies scholars or Sociologists, as well. What do you think the major take-aways from the book are?*

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DF: I think the first one is: popular culture is something you have to pay attention to. It should be part of the data of a Religious Studies education. In a lot of cases, we teach religion and popular culture as large cash-cow courses in universities, meant to kind-of pull students into the discipline and then get put into quote-unquote “real” coursework at upper levels. And I think that undervalues the work that's going on, that popular culture producers are doing themselves. So, one of the first takeaways is: this is deep, detailed material. I read through the book and there are days when I go, “Oh man, why didn't I include that example, or this example?” I threw out way more than I put in, which a lot of people will tell you about their books. So there's still. . . . I'm done working on these three series. But hopefully, somebody else will pick it up and in four or five years go, "OK! There's new material here!" Maybe there's been a new direction taken. I mean, South Park, for the last two years has done really interesting serial episodes throughout their seasons that are completely different from the stuff they were doing when I was writing the book. And who knows? I mean, the next season could turn completely into a massive story arc in which a particular religion or combination of religious traditions become major players. And that could change the argument that I make about South Park. Because these are still ongoing programmes and South Park is able to change directions very quickly – depending on where Trey Parker and Matt Stone want to go – unlike The Simpsons and Family Guy, which are such big productions that trying to turn those ships at this point would be incredibly difficult. So that's the first thing. The second thing is: jokes aren't just jokes. . . . would be the way that I would put it. Humour is grossly understudied as a means of transmitting religious information. And this is one of the arguments in the book that we haven't talked about a whole lot. But I talk about religious satire as running on sort-of two different tracks in the book. There's the sense of, it's religious satire in that it's jokes about groups that are considered religions. So there are Mormon jokes in there, there's scientology jokes. There's two chapters on all different types of Christians, there's Jews, there's Muslims, there's Buddhist and Hindus, Native American religious traditions. Because that's where the data was. But at the same time, I argue that the humour itself is doing this work of bringing people into, and here I use a modified version of William James' definition of religion: socialising you into an unseen order. And that, to me, has become – for me personally – one of the major take-aways from this project; that humour itself really socialises people and audiences very quickly, but with a ton of information flying at you, into a particular worldview. And we don't pay enough attention to the way that humour is doing that. (35:00) Humour is treated as something frivolous but, at least through working with this data, I found that it was far from just joking. I found it to be an incredibly powerful way of getting across that sense of “it's funny because it's true.” And this book is sort of written to say, “No, things are never funny because quote-unquote “they're true”. It's funny because people think

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they're true. And what are the consequences of socialising people into a big picture of how religious diversity should work, based on the jokes that they tell about religious groups? So, I think those would be the two biggest There's also this last one that I always find myself bringing out now because, yeah, I've been told I'm a crotchety old liberal arts professor even at the age of 35. But I really do think there's something valuable to thinking through the stuff that we are consuming. A bad episode of *The Simpsons* will get millions, literally, more viewers than will ever read my book. Unless, by an act of God, this becomes some sort of international bestseller. And I'm sure University Press would love if that happened, I know I would! Sitting down, thinking critically, assessing why we find certain things funny, asking ourselves, what was actually portrayed in this episode? Why do I get this joke? Because one of the experiences that scholars of religion can bring to programmes like this is, if you have a history of studying anything in religious studies – let's say you're a specialist in reform Judaism – you know more about, Reform Judaism than I do, because I'm not a specialist at all. But you can sit down and you can ask: OK, when they portray Jews, how are they doing that? What images are they drawing upon? What additional information can I bring into this conversation to change the way that people would look at this joke, this data? What are the advantages and disadvantages? That old-fashioned critical thinking approach. And the reason that I really like the *Simpsons* and *South Park* far more than *Family Guy* is that I think the *Simpsons* and *South Park* have within them a spirit of keeping that critical thinking tradition alive, far more than *Family Guy* does. And you can do this just by turning on your TV. And I wrote this book, in part, for students in those religion and pop culture classes, those large classes where people will show them an episode of *The Simpsons*, or *South Park*, or *Family Guy* and you can learn to do this from the get go. And that's a really important vital skill for sitting down and asking who you're going to be as a person, as a citizen, in this world. Because, at least for me, for example, when I was much younger I would laugh at racist jokes, before I ever met people of different races. I grew up in a predominantly small town, white New Brunswick culture, although there was a large Native population nearby. And it was after meeting people from different backgrounds that I went back, and I thought about jokes that I used to laugh at, and I thought, “You know, they're really not that funny, now that I know people that fit. So why did I laugh?” And I changed my behaviour accordingly. And thinking about laughter at jokes – why you laugh, what you're doing when you laugh. Jokes transmit a ton of information, very quickly. (40:00) And the more you can think about them, and the better you can think about them, and the clearer you can think about them, the more you can understand the relationships that are going on in the society around you. And then you can start asking what you want to do with them. And that's kind-of where I left the book at the end. I left it open-ended, in the sense that I want readers not to stop with the book. I want them to keep thinking

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after they're done reading it. So that would be the third take-away.

BF: *Well, I definitely found the book left me thinking about pop culture. And everything I watch now, you laugh and you think – you're right – why did I laugh at that? Why is it funny? And, you know particularly with The Simpsons and South Park and Family Guy, there is so much thought that goes into every single episode. And I really think that, you know, the academy is really kind-of clicked onto the politics side of those shows. They've clicked onto the idea that they're commenting about Trump, or they're commenting about American politics. But they haven't really clicked onto the idea that they really comment about religion. And I think you've really clicked onto that. And it's something that we can go beyond those three shows and really look further into pop culture at things that, perhaps we thought – you know, I hope I can say this – things that we thought perhaps weren't worthy of our time before; these shows were a bit low-brow and low-culture. But they're actually bringing out these ideas that people are consuming en masse. And they are conveying these ideas about religion, and this broad commentary, that people are consuming en masse. So thank you so much for joining us today. There are so many things in this interview that we can take forward and we can think about and talk about. So thank you so much for joining us again, Dave.*

DF: Thank you for having me.

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