

# THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

*Metropolitan Ephraim's note: This article is longer than most previous articles, but it is well worth your time to read it — especially the text written by Photius Kontoglou.*

When I was at the seminary, I was taught — in ways both subtle and open — that the Lives of the Saints are to be disdained. Usually, our professors did not say anything openly hostile in reference to the Lives of the Saints. On most occasions, they would just smile condescendingly, or smirk if you quoted something you had read in the Lives. Which made you wonder: what do these gentlemen believe about other things that they have read elsewhere? — things like the crossing of the Red Sea by the Jewish people in the time of Moses, the prophecies and miracles of the Prophets, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Virgin Birth, the walking on the Sea of Galilee, the resurrection of Lazarus, the Resurrection of Christ, the Ascension, etc., etc., etc. Or, to put it another way, is the God of the Holy Scriptures dead for these professors?

On the other hand, when I entered the monastery, virtually the first obedience I was given was to read the Lives of the Saints. Since very little Orthodox Christian literature was in English back then, I was assigned the task of reading the Lives of the Saints of the day, and then recounting them in brief right after Vespers for the benefit of the fathers. I did this for years, and I must admit that what I learned while reading the Lives in one year equaled what I had learned during all my years in the seminary.

The Athonite elder, Joseph the Cave-dweller, our spiritual grandfather, strongly endorsed the Lives of the Saints, saying that they were the first level (the primary school level) of Christian education.

Father Justin Popovich of Serbia firmly urged the reading of the Lives of the Saints, saying that they were the continuation of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, that they were "Applied Theology," and that those who did *not* read the Lives of the Saints would never progress in the spiritual life.

Furthermore, the Lives of the Saints were used by none other than the Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils in defending the Orthodox Faith. In the Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, for example, the Holy Fathers cite many incidents from the Lives of the Saints as *precedents* in defense of the veneration of the holy icons.

So, for our "know-it-all" professors, the "licensed theologians" (how I *love* that term) and the rationalists trained in heterodox seminaries, the Lives of the Saints are "the *legends* of the Saints," "pious stories," "monk's tales." But for the men and women of God, for the holy elders of our Church, and for the Church Fathers and God-enlightened heralds of our Faith, the Lives of the Saints are "the first level of a Christian education," "Applied theology," the "continuation of the Acts of the Apostles," precedents and models on which to base our Faith and our piety.

Now whose advice do you suppose I am going to follow?

And what a very good lesson this was for me. Human conceit and rationalism on one side ["The Shackles of the Latin Captivity"] vs. the Christian life, faith and piety.

Yes, I know, there is a need to authenticate one's sources, and to make sure we are not just being gullible; there is certainly a need for this. But even here, as I have seen many a time, the information about the authenticity of sources can be manipulated and twisted to fit one's own agenda, even in, or rather *especially* in, intellectual circles.

So, the upshot is: I still trust the men of God and the Church Fathers far more than I do any "licensed theologian" professors.

My warmest apologies to any genuinely Orthodox Christian theological academies.

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At this point, I bring to mind the words of that truly enlightened man, Photius Kontoglou, who, in his account concerning the New Martyrs – Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene of Lesbos\* – wrote the following in his Prologue and Epilogue to the book *A Great Sign*:

## PROLOGUE

"For the Lord is found by them that tempt Him not, and showeth Himself unto them that disbelieve not in Him." (Wisdom of Solomon 1:2)

Most men are unbelievers and have a heart as hard as stone. The unbeliever is not an unbeliever because he has never seen a miracle, but because he has within him a heart that does not have the inclination to believe because he is proud; whereas the man whose heart is humble receives the grace of God and inclines to belief before, or even without, God's power revealing itself to him in some special way.

Unbelief is very deeply rooted in some men. There does not exist a more stiff-necked monster than the unbeliever.

In the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, the Lord has taught us how difficult it is for such a man to believe, glued as he is to material things. In this parable, the Lord says that when these two men died, the Angels took the soul of the afflicted Lazarus and brought

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\* See the article, "The Light of the World Is Not of This World."

it to the bosom of Abraham, whereas the soul of the rich man who passed his earthly life in all manner of carnal prodigality went to Hades, that is, to the place of torment. And there from afar off, while the unfortunate one was being tormented he saw Lazarus in the bosom of the patriarch Abraham and he cried out with lamentation: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip his finger in the water to refresh my tongue, because I am tormented in this fire." And Abraham told him, "My child, remember that you enjoyed your good things in your lifetime, and Lazarus suffered deprivation and disdain. And now, he has found rest, and you suffer." Then the rich man cried out again, "I entreat you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house because I have five brothers so that he can tell them not to pass their life with pleasures and unbelief as I did, so that they also might not come to this place where I suffer torments." And Abraham answered, "They have Moses and the Prophets who have commanded them what they should do to save their souls. Let them listen to them." Then the rich man said, "No, Father Abraham, it is not the same. Because if someone from the dead goes to them, they will listen to him and will repent." And Abraham answered him, "If they do not listen to what Moses and the Prophets command, neither will they believe if even a dead man should arise."

You see, brother, how unbelieving a man is when he is far from God and when he does not incline his heart humbly to receive His grace, but has an evil mind? The rich man thought that his brothers would believe if some dead man arose. Whereas the patriarch Abraham knew that only the soul, which believes in God and His word is in a position to believe in miracles. For faith is a gift that is given from God to whoever has humility and a pure heart, according to the word, which the Lord spoke in His Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." These simple-hearted and simple-minded people receive grace and are accounted worthy to see divine mysteries, since the eye of both their body and soul is not evil, but simple. "The light of the body," says the Lord, "is the eye. If,

therefore, your eye is simple, your whole body will be illumined. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be darkened."

That darkened eye is the evil and unbelieving man who examines all things and probes into them with an air of detachment, being of the proud opinion that he knows all things, and that he cannot be fooled like the simple ones who are gullible. The spiritual eyes of man grow evil and become gross when he is immersed in sinful pleasures and in bestial passions. And while man is plunged into this darkness, he is of the opinion that he can see better than all since he thinks that his evil curiosity and skepticism are something notable at the very time when he is not able to see the truth at all, but gropes along a wall like some blind man.

In every age, the unbelievers were many, but in our days they have multiplied beyond limits. Today's men have deified science and machines, the new idols which show the power of man's mind. In the presence of these things, they forget God and mock those who worship Him. These men believe only in material things, and they busy themselves with the comforts of this world, and they quote that which the Apostle Paul says of them: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Most men do not know that, besides these visible things, there are also other invisible and incomprehensible things. They believe neither in God, nor in the other life; for them, this fleeting life, which is dispelled like smoke, is everything. These men are "they that have not hope," as the same Apostle says, who also, in another place, writes: "If the dead arise not, neither is Christ arisen. And if Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain. You still live in sin. Therefore, as many as have died believing in Christ, they are lost. If we have our hope in Christ for this life only, we are the most miserable of all men."

Truly, there are many Christians who believe in Christ only for the affairs of this fleeting life, and they entreat Him to help them in difficult situations. But their faith and their hope does not go beyond the grave. These people are not true Christians, as the Apostle Paul says above, but rather they are the most miserable of men.

## **Concerning "Licensed Theologians"\***

But, very well, this can be said concerning unenlightened men who do not know their faith well. But what can we say concerning those men who concern themselves with the things of religion and study the holy books, especially the so-called theologians who study in the lands of Europe where atheism rules? They are truly the blind men who want to guide other blind men. They are, as the Apostle Paul says, "they that have the form of piety, but who deny its power," that is, externally they study the things of religion but are found far from its true knowledge, and for this reason, they do not accept its power.

When they hear of awesome mysteries that are revealed to certain simple people who have a fear of God, many that have been educated abroad and who are influenced by the rationalistic spirit of the West, — I mean contemporary theologians, as well as other educated scientists — mock these people, so that they themselves may not appear to be gullible to others who honor them as being wise; for, in order for one to be wise and profound, he has to appear skeptical. Therefore, when they hear that, by divine Providence some strange and supernatural wonders have been revealed, and that terrible mysteries are being unveiled, these men are troubled; they become dazzled by the light and they shut their eyes and become wholly blinded. And in order to hide their distress, they shout that these are myths and products of the imagination. Such men are terror-stricken, for their city "is not founded upon iron pillars," nor "upon a brass post."

Their punishment is that they see none of the wondrous things the faithful see, because they are un-compunctionate and cold. They are separated from God and His Kingdom since they have loved the glory of men more than the glory of God. The Christian is he that has a spiritual eye and a spiritual ear. Only he sees, while others do not see, even though he may be illiterate and disdained, while the others, the

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\* The subtitle is added here by myself: Metropolitan Ephraim

blind ones, are praised as wise, clever, and notable. For, according to the divine-tongued Apostle Paul, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is mightier than the strength of men." Further down, the same Apostle says that, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world has God chosen to shame the mighty; and the disdained things has God chosen, and things that are of no account, in order to abolish the notable, so that no carnal man might boast before God."

These extraordinary words of our religion, as well as many other similar ones, are read by the educated of whom I spoke above, and they examine them, but only externally, just as the blind man feels different objects without being able to perceive what they hide within. "Unbelief," says one saint, "is a leprosy of the soul, which touches the words of religion but does not feel them; for the hands of a leper are numb and dead."

I write many things about the educated because I also am one of them, and I know well the false wisdom as well as the vanity of that wisdom which they study in the lands of unbelief. Yet, the unfortunate common people believe that these men possess true wisdom, and although they are wiser than the latter, they have them as their guides, since the others have degrees and diplomas. And with the profound and ungrounded theories that they teach, they have sullied the pure faith of our people, and simple souls are scandalized by the preachings of these men who have no faith whatsoever, but who are tinkling cymbals. For these men, their only saints are their professors who have filled their mind and heart with futile and false things. Such spiritual guides are worse than atheists, since atheists are indifferent and do not always concern themselves with divine matters, nor does anyone wait to be guided by them. Whereas by their teachings, the others plant the worm of disbelief in the hearts of the faithful at the very time the unfortunate ones expect to be strengthened in the faith by them, and to receive a spiritual helping hand and enlightenment. For this, I say that these new Sadducees are worse than atheists.

And I am not the one that says it, — I, who am burdened down with sins — but the very mouth of the Lord says it when He blessed those that are innocent and trustful like children and said: "Amen, I tell you, if you do not turn back and become like children, you will not enter into the Kingdom of the Heavens." And further down, He again says, "Whoever scandalizes one of these innocent ones that believes in Me — that is to say, puts an evil suspicion in his heart - it were better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and drown himself in the depth of the sea."

Yes. Our Orthodox people have an ancestral piety, and they themselves are teachers of piety, since they "are not ones that learn things divine, but ones who experience them," according to the saying of St. Dionysius the Areopagite. That is, they did not learn the things of religion like parrots, but rather have made them a part of their life. Because of this, they have no need of such teachers, but of saints who come forth from their very bowels.

These people teach the wise men of the world by their humble piety, by the revelation of mysteries, and by the miracles, which they are deemed worthy to see. For they love God and God receives them as His children according to grace, and He reveals the awesome mysteries of His Kingdom to them according to the words which the Lord spoke to His disciples the night He was given over to be crucified: "He that loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will reveal Myself to him."

Yes, my brethren, every so often, the Lord reveals Himself to the pious that love Him. Either He Himself, or His All-holy Mother, or His saints, who are mediators between God and ourselves, reveal themselves to the simple and poor folk of our afflicted people. These are the manifestations of His love. By the miracles, which certain humble Christians are accounted worthy to see, faith is made steadfast in the hearts of the Orthodox Christians. By these miracles, the babbling and impious mouths are silenced. By these miracles, the

unbelievers are put to flight and are shamed and the faithful rejoice as they hold fast to the anchor of salvation.

Oh, you who close your eyes before the light that comes forth from the bowels of the earth, and shut your ears so that you might not hear the echoes and voices that come from the other life! Where are your wise and complex theories, all you that unsettle the world with your teachings and have rendered it insane and utterly confused? *Go get big keys and lock the schools and the universities of false knowledge which were created by the evil foolishness of man who has fallen away from the path of God* [Metropolitan Ephraim's emphasis].

Because of their little faith, Christ censured those who were like you, the scribes of old who interpreted the words of the Scripture with their dead and carnal mind, whereas the simple people believed in His words and rejoiced: "And when He had said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him" (Luke 13:17).

Who is it that will not kneel and worship the footstool of the feet of the Lord Who reveals His terrible and invincible power and majesty in certain weak creatures? Blessed are you who are mocked by the clever and notable ones of this world, for you stand upon a firm rock, "being radiant in hope," whereas around you, the unbelievers are troubled like reeds shaken by the wind of fear and despair.

Oh, you who struggle in the dark storm of unbelief, "who are immersed in the tempest of disbelief," I beg of you, read with attention the things that are written in this book and impress them in the depths of your heart.

*(Here, there follows the account of the martyrdom in 1462 of Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene, and of their appearances to the people of Lesbos in 1958).*

## EPILOGUE

Now, brethren, bring; to mind vividly the awesome miracles narrated by the people who saw them.

You will say: "Have we, perhaps, been in a different world?" and you will wonder, for things that other people consider impossible and incredible, have clearly appeared to us.

And what manner of people were counted worthy to see and hear these awesome mysteries? Some notable, famous and important people? No. Most of them are people of humble origin, semi-literate or quite illiterate, not rich, and some of them living in the darkest poverty. Yes. God's grace has always been made manifest to such people, for they have few ties with the pleasures of this world and they have a humble and a contrite heart, because of their poverty and the contempt they suffer from others. In such souls does the fear of God dwell, while in those who have power and riches there dwells audacity and impiety. For this cause, it is written, "The poor man and beggar shall praise Thy name, O Lord." The Lord gives gladness to the souls that lament and are afflicted. So also now, "the Lord hath shown mercy to His people and He hath comforted the humble among His people."

Behold! illiterate women are deemed worthy to see God's wonderful and unutterable miracles, even as those Myrrh-bearers were deemed worthy to see the resurrected Christ and to hear: "Rejoice." Knowing no history, they teach unwritten history to us who are literate; they tell us things that happened after the taking of Constantinople by the Turks: how Christian refugees fled from Thrace and Macedonia, how the two Saints, St. Raphael and St. Nicholas, fled by boat from Alexandroupolis and reached Mytilene [Lesbos] in 1454, that is, one year after the fall of Constantinople, which, as we know from books, occurred in 1453. These simple women become resounding preachers, censuring our lack of faith and hard-

heartedness. They bring us the joyful news of the Resurrection, just as the Myrrh-bearers did.

Rustic people, laborers, fishermen and shepherds, were deemed worthy to have a door opened unto them, which is closed to the learned, clever, and important people of this world, and they were accounted worthy to enter that mystic world. The Lord has granted them spiritual eyes and ears, whereas we have only the physical ones. For "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in the presence of God" (I Cor., 1:27-29).

And the Saints appear before us as they were in life, five hundred years ago, with the same characteristics their bodies possessed at that time.

"The spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them" (Rev., 11:11).

St. Raphael says he was born on Odysseus' island, Ithaca.

The young girl Irene, who was martyred with them, appears with parted blond hair, with a delicate face — in incorruptibility. O judgments of the almighty God!

We, the living, who live in this unstable and corruptible world converse with the Saints who lived on earth 500 years ago; we converse with those who fear death no longer; they who are beyond death keep company with those who yet await death!

O awesome mystery! which, even to think of, makes one tremble. The characteristics which the body possessed and which soon after death alter and dissolve and vanish in the chaos of time and which totally disappear, reappear again — the same, unharmed,

incorruptible, eternal, after centuries! How many generations have passed through this life, how many myriads of men, how many souls? — and their bodies have melted away and have become dust and no one remembers any longer what their countenances were like: extinguished eyes, faces consumed by the earth, hair, hands, feet, shapeless without honor, bereft of form: The irresistible tide of corruption has absorbed them without any hope that they may arise again from non-existence. O darkening of our weak reason! O paralysis of the knees! O mighty and invisible power of the Lord!

And behold, the two Saints, Raphael and Nicholas, stand before us and appear as they were in 1462, at the time when the Turks took Lesbos, — alive, unharmed, and they speak to us, and comfort us, and say to us: "Fear not," as the Angel of the Resurrection said to the Myrrh-bearers. And they tell us their history with all the details, and we see their monastery as it was at that time, and they describe their martyrdom to us as if it happened to others and not to them; they who were massacred five hundred years ago speak to us of their massacre. And they burn incense, and chant and glorify God with us and angels praise them, and the All-Holy Mother of God accompanies them, and we hear bells whose sound reaches our ears from the abyss of the centuries, and we perceive the fragrance of the incense with our physical senses.

We who are weak are counted worthy to keep company with the strong; we who are afraid of death with those who are not afraid of it; we who are the slaves of matter with those who are liberated by immortality; we who are corruptible with the incorruptible. Oh, in what wondrous manner is this world united with the other, whereas between them "there is a great gulf fixed!" (Lk. 16:26).

O great and ineffable miracles beyond all conception! How did all these things come forth out of the abyss of non-existence? And how do men with flesh, which with every passing hour is destroyed and suffers corruption, speak familiarly to the immaterial spirits of the Saints and

withstand this fiery trial and turn back to this corruptible world, as if something commonplace had happened to them?

Yes! I clearly hear the sweet voice of Christ, Who said to Lazarus' sister: "He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." What other firm anchor can man grasp in the tempest wherein he is found except the one which the Christian' holds? All other men are possessed by the fear that comes from unbelief. Only the hope of the Christians is full of immortality.

Speaking of the miracles of God of which the simple are deemed worthy, St. Isaac the Syrian writes: "These things happen to the simplest of heart and most fervent in hope." Who of the mighty of the earth possesses this hope in his heart? Who has received that assurance which only the despised and the insignificant ones of this world can possess? They alone, indeed, are the ones who receive mercy from the Lord and breathe the air of life everlasting. Did not the holy mouth of our Lord say to His disciples: "Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see, for I tell you that many Prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them. (Lk. 10:23-24).

And who are these kings and prophets? They are the wise and the learned who move humanity and lead it where they wish, and the sinful world glorifies them, deeming them as its saviors. It is they who think they hold the keys to knowledge at the very time they founder in the darkness of sin, ignorance, and death. It is they who apply themselves to the sciences and search day and night with their dark mind. It is they who build engines and rockets to investigate the universe and who have not understood Christ's awesome saying: "the Kingdom of God is within you." This is why they occupy themselves only with the external aspect of the world, like blind men, feeling the outside of the cup and dish, while illiterate and simple men see and hear great mysteries and understand the true constitution of the world, which is hidden from the arrogant who think that they possess

the keys to the mystery of creation. The wise men of this world are those of whom the Prophet Isaias says that they hear and do not understand, who see and do not perceive, who close their eyes that they may not see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart, that God may enlighten them: Their pride is like a curtain that prevents them from seeing the light. With all their unwise wisdom, they are in no condition to understand the words which humble souls understand, as St. Isaac says: "Enter the chamber which is within you and you shall see the heavenly palace. For both the latter and the former are one, and through the same door, you see them both."

O blind scientist, you who concern yourself with futile and false things! Blind you shall die; blind shall you reach the ends of this material, corruptible world with your missile! You think you possess wisdom and knowledge, and there you are, unfortunate man, outside of your own house! You have only learned to make computations and to screw screws which rust and become dust, even like your own corruptible mind.

You think you see the light, while you are in utter darkness. You do not see one single ray of truth, whereas humble and despised men see the depth of the mysteries of the world and approach eternity, the existence of which you do not even suspect. Slave away, slave of your own arrogance; seek day and night, hurl your pieces of machinery into the chaos of space. You will reach the rim of the universe, one hundred, five hundred, a thousand light years from earth. But wherever you reach, you will arrive there the same as you are here — a trivial-souled and despairing dwarf. You will drag your blind pride to the edge of the universe, and you will die there as you would have died here on earth, without having been enlightened by even one small ray of truth, and estranged from God's mercy. For "the Lord resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" (Jas. 4:6).

To such unfruitful works of darkness do the children of this dying world apply themselves. They are the dead of whom Christ has said,

"Let the dead bury their dead" (Mat. 8:22). Concerning unbelievers, St. Basil says: "They that concern themselves with futile wisdom are like unto the eyes of the owl. For its eyes love the night but when the sun shines, they are darkened. So also is the mind of these men: it is exceedingly sharp in the contemplation of futile things, but in the understanding of the true light, it is in the dark."

But as for us, let us glorify and thank the Lord for the gift we have received, even though we are unworthy of such a great benefaction. Truly, how great is God's mercy which is shown us! He answers our impiety with benevolence. He illumines our darkness with light. He compensates our poverty with imperishable riches. The more sinful we are, the more clemency He shows us; the more we are unworthy of His love, the more warmly He spreads out His arms to embrace us. How are we worthy that such miracles should be shown to us? We, who are immersed in sin and intemperance, particularly on the blessed isle of Lesbos, where God is forgotten and Mammon and Aphrodite have raised their throne? But that we may not fall headlong into the chasm of perdition, God did not beat us with a whip, nor strike us with a staff. And this happened according to the words of Apostle Paul, who said: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20). So let us repent with all our heart. Let us weep over our sins. Woe to us if we do not turn away from the evil road we walk:

Yet, at the same time, let us thank the Lord for the weapons he has given us against the unbelievers. "Rejoice in the Lord with trembling." Yes, let us leap from blessed joy, feeling fear at the same time for all that our Master's forbearance has shown us. Let delight and rejoicing come to our hearts. Shout with jubilation to the Lord in a voice of rejoicing! Let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God; let them delight with gladness. The fear of God is glory and exultation and gladness and a crown of joy. Terror shall lay hold of the ungodly.

Let us call out with tears of compunction:

Wondrous is God in His saints. God has made His saints wondrous on earth. For as the Father raiseth up the dead and quickeneth them, even so the Son quickeneth whom He will. "Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life" (Mat. 19:29), says the Lord. And again He says: "Amen, amen I say unto you, he that heareth My word and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment; but passeth from death unto life" (John 5:24). "I am the living bread which came down from Heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever" (John 6:51).

"Encircle Thérmi,\* O ye people, and encompass her and give glory with her to Him Who hath arisen, from the dead and raiseth His saints and makes His mercy shine resplendently upon them that fear Him."

O Holy Martyrs, who have come to us since we could not come to you, O compassionate ambassadors of the all-good God, ye ancient and whole-burnt offerings of Orthodoxy who have blossomed forth from the bowels of the earth, which has kept you hidden for five hundred years. Ye incorrupt warriors who stand upright again, even though the demon-souled enemies of the faith crushed you and buried you in the depths of the earth, we, fall down and worship you, O ye incorrupt and ever-living vessels of the Omnipotent God!\*\*

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\* The little village in Lesbos where the Saints appeared.

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