

Are we what we wear?

The ethics of our  
clothing choices

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### **1. Introduction**

What do our clothes say about ourselves? Clothes have always been an important way for people to express themselves through demonstrating choice and preference for styles and colours. Clothes can help develop a sense of individuality and creativity, as well as being part of a community and uniformity. But there is also a growing awareness of the consequences of our actions in a globalised world. Our clothing choices affect the producers and manufacturers of clothes, and the environment. This report seeks to encourage an exploration of our global responsibilities in the context of the decisions we make with regard to clothing.

Since before the dawn of recorded time people have worn clothes to keep warm and as an expression of ritual, style or status. We have tried to keep this report tightly focused on some of the ethical issues involved in clothing choices for our 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western society.

Scotland has a great tradition of clothes-making that should be celebrated and maintained. The Scottish textile industry employs some 22,000 people, 6.3% of manufacturing jobs in Scotland. Textiles account for around 3% of all Scottish manufactured exports.<sup>1</sup> Textiles are particularly important to parts of the rural economy in areas that have a long history of manufacturing clothes. When making choices about buying clothes, supporting local businesses and, where possible, buying clothes that have been produced nearby is to be commended. Buying local supports small businesses and helps community life as well as keeping the costs of transport of raw materials and finished products to a minimum.

This report aims to reflect on some of the biblical references to clothing, to look at issues to do with creativity and expression before developing ideas around responsibility and the ethical questions that are raised by the clothing industry.

### **2. Clothing, Fashion and the Bible**

The Bible reminds us that clothing is merely a covering, beneath which we are equal in the eyes of God.<sup>2</sup> Clothing provides us with comfort, enjoyment and protection, yet according to the Bible it is not something about which we should worry.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in Biblical narratives as in today's culture, it can be an important signifier of self-image, social status, role and responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sdi.co.uk/Key%20Industries/Textiles/Key%20Facts.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> In Genesis 3: 7 Adam and Eve wove fig leaves for clothes, and in Genesis 3: 21 God made garments of skins for them. In 1 Samuel 16: 7 God spoke to Samuel and said that 'mortals look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'.

<sup>3</sup> In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus says "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like on of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is

Clothing in the Bible is used to signify a vast range of motives and meanings. It is used as a mark of respect, honour and generosity and as a metaphor for God's favour, provision and protection.<sup>4</sup> Putting on new clothes can indicate purification or a change of mood, such as the end of a period of mourning. Status is frequently indicated by the clothes people wear, such as widowhood or kingship, though James warns of judging people incorrectly by the clothes they wear:

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?<sup>5</sup>

Clothing is mentioned as a right in Exodus 21<sup>6</sup> and by Jesus, by implication, in Matthew 25<sup>7</sup>. Dirty and torn clothes or the absence of clothing, are signs of poverty and suffering. Conversely, clean clothes can be signs of respect for God in worship and health. Clothes can be a metaphor for righteousness, watchfulness and readiness<sup>8</sup>. Clothes as gifts can be about honouring the recipient (Joseph<sup>9</sup>) or caring (the man set upon by robbers).<sup>10</sup>

Often in the Bible the clothes people choose to wear tell us about them and what they are doing. People use them for disguise; for concealing a weapon; as a tool for seduction; and to indicate a sense of their own importance. Elisha receives Elijah's mantle as a sign of succession and responsibility<sup>11</sup>. Angels wear particularly bright clothes<sup>12</sup> and Jesus' clothes glow at his

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alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?' And in Mark 12: 38 – Jesus criticises the scribes 'who like to walk around in long robes'.

<sup>4</sup> See i) Genesis 28:20 – "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear...'" ii) Exodus 28:40-41 – "For Aaron's sons you shall make tunics and sashes and head-dresses you shall make them for their glorious adornment." iii) Leviticus 6:10 – "The priest shall put on his linen vestments after putting on his linen undergarments next to his body..." iv) Deuteronomy 29:5 – Moses said "I have led you for forty years in the wilderness. The clothes on your back have not worn out, and the sandals on your feet have not worn out." v) Ezekiel 42:14 – "When the priests enter the holy place, they shall not go out of it into the outer court without laying there the vestments in which they minister, for these are holy; they shall put on other garments before they go near to the area open to the people"

<sup>5</sup> James 2:2-3

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 21 is part of the Old Testament law. It confirms the rights of a wife whose husband takes a second wife. It says that he 'shall not diminish the food, clothing or marital rights of the first wife.'

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:35-36 – "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

<sup>8</sup> Luke 12:35-40 – "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit... You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour".

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 37:3 – Jacob "loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves."

<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:30-35 – the parable of the Good Samaritan

<sup>11</sup> 2 Kings 2:14

<sup>12</sup> Luke 24:3 – the Resurrection "While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them".

Transfiguration.<sup>13</sup> Jesus' clothes are associated with healing when a woman touches the hem of his cloak;<sup>14</sup> he is dressed in scarlet to be mocked by the Roman soldiers and lots cast for his garments as he hung upon the cross.<sup>15</sup>

Given that we know what Jesus was dressed in moments after his birth and what he was wearing just before he was nailed to the cross, we may draw the conclusion that clothes are perhaps more important than we think. As comment and metaphor, clothes deserve careful thought and appreciation.

### **3. Clothing, creativity and faithfulness**

For many people, buying, reading about and showing off clothes is important. The Church should affirm and celebrate the joy that people can take from clothing, and encourage people to feel good about the clothes they wear.

Many of us make instant judgements about both people and institutions based on clothes. For instance work clothes and uniforms make a statement. We will often categorise people just by the clothes that they wear. We expect certain things from different groups of people, and we make assumptions very easily. Income, education, background and ability are often judged on first impressions, and wardrobe choices mean that others will consciously or unconsciously think about what sort of a person you are.

The church itself faces misconceptions about its image and attitude to clothing. By social convention it was expected people would dress smartly on Sundays for Church. But have we always made people who don't dress formally for Church feel welcome? The concept of "Sunday Best" came from a time when dressing smartly for Church was to "offer your best for God". This has sometimes reinforced negative perceptions about how the church and its membership saw themselves in relation to the rest of society. The church should clearly affirm that all are welcome, and that no person should be judged by what they wear.

Of course, there is nothing to be criticised in wearing particular clothes to make a statement – especially when someone wishes to offer their best to God. Picking and choosing your own clothes can be a great joy, and is an important way for individuals to express themselves. Whole clothing cultures have developed, and people will often wear clothes for a reason. Different nationalities and ethnic groups will also have their own traditional dress, not least Scottish tartan. In some cultures national dress is very important, because of history and asserting who one is. Young people using their clothes to express their identity or belonging to a particular group is nothing new. Clothing choice can also be a political statement – which might have included wearing white bands during 2005 for MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY, or blue t-shirts in December 2009 for the Wave, a rally to support action against climate change. Women and men all over the world wear all-black clothes on

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<sup>13</sup> The Transfiguration - Luke 9: 29 "And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white".

<sup>14</sup> Luke 8: 43-48

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 27: 28-35

Thursdays – ‘Thursdays in Black’ is an international awareness raising and advocacy campaign against gender-based violence.

Some people choose their clothes to express their individuality and difference. Others choose clothes to conform. For others the priority in their clothing choices is comfort, warmth, or price. One concerning development is the manufacture of clothes aimed at young children which appear to sexualise them. Clothes such as a children’s t-shirts with the Playboy logo and ‘Porn Star in the Making’ on the front, as well as padded bikini tops for pre-teenage girls have been produced in the past few years – and have been widely criticised. The pressures on young people to grow up too quickly was highlighted in the report to the 2009 Church of Scotland General Assembly *Growing up in Scotland*.

The fashion business has developed alongside the sophistication of clothes and the creativity of human beings. This can cause significant tension for Christians: it is good to recognise and celebrate creativity, but that same creativity can become an obsession with design perfection, and which tends to be blind to injustices and abuse. John Calvin and Calvin Klein are cut from very different cloth. Poverty is a reality for many people and even simple clothes, let alone fashionable ones, are an unattainable luxury. It should also be remembered that there are many who are exploited in the manufacture of clothing. In this country there is considerable pressure on people from all economic backgrounds to have the best clothes. The 2010 Church and Society Report to the General Assembly on Societal Issues included the views from Anna, a young woman who was involved in a church-run project working with people in poverty. She said she believed that youngsters buy and wear what they think their peer group value, rather than what they themselves like: “They need to learn not to worry about what others think, or what they wear. If they were happy with their own style, they’d be less worried about what other people think.” Designer-label clothes are expensive, and it can be difficult for families with growing children all wanting the must-have item. Some high-end designer fashions have considerable mark-ups. On luxury items we have to ask how much we really value fashionable garments.

St Paul writes in Romans 1:25 ‘They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator’. One might choose to work and pray for the fashion industry to completely end the use of sweat shops, drastically reduce its environmental impact and stop implying that success, physical beauty, sex appeal and happiness are intimately linked.

Seeking to be more aware of the costs of clothing production, being more careful about keeping clothes longer, and not discarding them when they become less fashionable are important ways of taking action on these issues. It is surely possible to celebrate creativity in clothing, and enjoy wearing clothes without suggesting that fashion offers real hope and lasting joy in and of itself.

#### 4. Clothing as consumption

*Converting fibres to garments, furnishings, carpets etc., requires energy, water, chemicals, and land. It also releases considerable waste and emissions, most significantly for the textile sector, to water. These impacts don't just stop in the field or at the factory gates, for what happens as a garment is transported, used, re-used and finally thrown away is also critical to understanding its sustainability impacts.<sup>16</sup>*

The clothing industry pollutes the air and water. Waste is produced and resources are consumed in clothing production. How do we approach issues of the integrity of creation and sustainability when it comes to our clothing choices? Information and awareness is a necessary starting point. For instance, cotton production uses chemicals for removing fibres from the plant, for cleaning and for dyeing which can be harmful to both humans and the environment. It is estimated that the cotton industry alone consumes 2.6% of the world's water use.<sup>17</sup> There have been attempts to alleviate these problems. Manufacturers in Germany have found that on average every kilogram of cotton takes five tonnes of water to produce. A life-cycle analysis of the factory processes showed how resources were being wasted. Careful planning has meant that they have been able to reduce the waste water going into rivers by 92% and the overall consumption of water by 80%.<sup>18</sup>

##### **Reducing our consumption and waste of clothes will contribute significantly to reducing our carbon footprint.**

- We each throw away on average 30kg of textiles a year. Most goes to landfill and only a third to charity shops
- Most people recycle glass bottles, but not clothes, even though recycling clothes saves more CO<sub>2</sub>
- In 2006, UK clothing and textiles produced up to two million tonnes of waste, 3.1 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> and 70 million tonnes of waste water
- When they are manufactured, when they are transported, when they are washed and even when they are thrown away, clothes are responsible for significant greenhouse gas emissions. Scientists claim that sourcing all your clothes second hand, or just not buying any will save 70kg of CO<sub>2</sub>.
- In fact, it takes ten times more energy to make a tonne of textiles than it does a tonne of glass, and when you throw wool and cotton clothes into landfill, they produce methane - a gas 23 times more powerful at warming the atmosphere than CO<sub>2</sub>.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bloom/actions/clothingcare.shtml#quickjump>

<sup>16</sup> Kate Fletcher – *Sustainable Design in Fashion and Textile* accessed at [www.katefletcher.com](http://www.katefletcher.com) on 12 April 2010.

<sup>17</sup> *The Water Footprint of Cotton Consumption*, UNESCO – IHE / Institute for Water Education, Authors: A.K. Chapagain, A.Y. Hoekstra, H.H.G. Savenije and R. Gautam, September 2005. <http://www.waterfootprint.org/Reports/Report18.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/headspace/rn/ebeat/fashion/default.htm>

There are many low cost improvements possible at every stage in the textile production life-cycle.<sup>19</sup> Better process measurement and control, water recycling, chemical substitution and reduction, energy efficiency and new product development using waste materials are all possible options. Local and global trade associations are active in exploring environmental issues and in providing training. The UN Environmental Protection Programme has a wide range of examples from around the world.<sup>20</sup>

Being aware of some of the environmental impacts of clothing production, what are the options for consumers in Scotland? One way forward is to repair and / or reuse as much as possible. We can be more intentional in getting rid of clothes when they are no further use to us. In 2008 the UK consumed over two million tonnes – worth £40 billion – of clothing. Each year we throw away over one million tonnes of textiles – most of which ends up in landfill.<sup>21</sup> Rather than throwing them away, there are a growing number of opportunities to give clothes a second life.

In addition to high street charity shops, some church congregations have begun to use redundant clothes to boost income or community activity by holding regular sales or running shops. One example is a monthly 'Nearly New' shop run by Craigentenny St Christopher's in Edinburgh, which both supports the congregation's funds and offers an opportunity for a more sustainable approach to clothing choices. Another approach is to set up a 'Clothing Exchange' where items of clothes can be bought and then returned to be swapped for another item. St Andrew's and St George's West Church in Edinburgh hosts *Charity Chic*, which aims to reduce exploitative clothing consumption through ethical, fair-trade and eco-friendly initiatives. Individuals are strongly encouraged to donate to and buy from high street charity shops. Congregation members that have the skills and talents to repair and mend clothes could consider ways to offer these services to the rest of the congregation, or the community, or help teach these skills to a new generation.

The Salvation Army is the largest operator of textile banks in Britain, with over 2,000 banks across the UK.

For information on Salvation Army work to recycle and reuse clothes visit [www.wear2bank.co.uk](http://www.wear2bank.co.uk)

The Association of Charity Shops have a website with a list of members and a search function, making it easy to find your nearest charity shop. [www.charityshops.org.uk](http://www.charityshops.org.uk)

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<sup>19</sup> [www.cleanerproduction.com](http://www.cleanerproduction.com)

<sup>20</sup> [www.uneptie.org/scp](http://www.uneptie.org/scp)

<sup>21</sup> Charty Durrant article 'The Tyranny of Trends', *Resurgence Magazine*, May 2009, reproduced in edited extract of *Natural Collection* catalogue, January 2010.

Counterfeit clothes provide a problem for manufactures, HM Revenue and Customs and Trading Standards, as well as customers who receive poorer quality products. The UK Government's Intellectual Property Office suggests that the proceeds of counterfeit goods are used to fund serious organised crime, including human trafficking, drug smuggling and prostitution.<sup>22</sup>

However, once seized, counterfeit clothes can have a new life. *His Church*, a Christian charity based in Bedfordshire collects seized counterfeit clothes from local authorities across Scotland and the rest of the UK. The clothes have their badges taken off, are re-branded with the *His Church* logo and are sent to support projects in developing countries.<sup>23</sup>

We can also be careful about making sure any new clothes have been produced in a way which is less harmful to the environment and producers. One way of doing this is to buy Fairtrade clothes. Most people associate Fairtrade with food – such as bananas, chocolate or tea and coffee. But there is also a growing market for fairly traded clothes, particularly cotton. The fundamentals of Fairtrade are the same – a clear and well-established mark that gives consumers the confidence that they are helping producers of raw materials. The producers are guaranteed a minimum price for their cotton. There are now hundreds of items with the Fairtrade mark available from a wide range of retailers.<sup>24</sup> Fairtrade reminds us also that clothing production is not just about the resources consumed or the pollution produced, but that the manufacture of clothes involves the life and work of many people in the developing world. From cotton farmers to garment factory workers, in our globalised world there is scope for economic development, but often the clothing industry is also a place of great exploitation.

## 5. The human costs of clothing

Working conditions for garment workers around the world vary. At one extreme end there are well-documented stories of sweatshops where forced labour and child exploitation is prevalent. Terrible though these places are, they are only a very small part of a very large industry. There are much wider systemic problems that garment workers face – low pay, sexual harassment, difficult working conditions and denial of trade union rights. UK-based campaign *Labour Behind the Label* has highlighted a series of issues affecting workers in developing countries, including:

- Employers using violence and harassment against workers
- Employers sacking or refusing to employ trade union members
- Poor health and safety, including not providing clean drinking water to factory workers, or allowing them to use the toilet when they need to. Indonesian women working in a factory said they have to wear dark clothes when they are menstruating because they knew that during the long working hours and with limited access to toilets, blood would leak through their clothes.

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<sup>22</sup> Annual Intellectual Property Crime Report 2008-09 available at <http://www.ipo.gov.uk/ipcreport08.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Edinburgh Evening News, 28 March 2008 – available at <http://edinburghnews.scotsman.com/topstories/Seized-fake-designer-clothes-kit.3924583.jp>

<sup>24</sup> [www.fairtrade.org.uk/products/cotton/stockists.aspx](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/products/cotton/stockists.aspx)

- Difficult working conditions which strain eyesight and affect body posture
- Exposure to toxic chemicals used in the production and dyeing of clothes
- Low pay. National Minimum Wages are often kept low by Governments in competition for foreign investment in their country. There are also millions of homeworkers and garment makers in less developed countries who are paid per item, not by how long they have worked. The rate per piece often makes it impossible to earn a living wage in a normal working week, but when the issue is raised, managers will simply argue that they should work faster. Employed informally and further removed from the brands, they are more vulnerable to seasonal variations in work. Informal workers also lose out on other payments such as social security, pension, health insurance and redundancy pay, meaning their overall wage is even less.
- There are often no proper contracts of employment between the employer and employee, so there is no redress if the employee wants to raise issues of safety at work or pay. Not having a contract is now becoming standard practice in parts of the industry.
- The overwhelming majority of garment workers are women. There are reports of employers whom will not employ a woman if she is pregnant, or if she is married. Some factories insist women take a pregnancy test before getting the job, and are sacked if they become pregnant.
- Long working hours – usually 10-12 hours per day, seven days a week. When a deadline is looming this can increase to 16 or even 18 hour days.

Phan, a 22-year-old machinist in a Thai garment factory, gives this account of life at her factory:

**We work from 8 am till noon, then have our lunch break. After lunch we work from 1 to 5 pm. We do overtime every day, from 5.30 pm. During the peak season, we work until 2 or 3 am. Although exhausted, we have no choice. We cannot refuse overtime: our basic wage is too low. If we want to rest, our employer forces us to keep working.**

<http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org/background/conditions/working-hours>

In October 2009 the 'Asian Floor Wage Alliance' was launched. This is a coalition of workers' labour organisation from across Asia, supported by trade unions, labour NGOs, anti-sweatshop movements and academics from Europe and the USA. Together they calculated a minimum wage for garment factory workers to prevent further wage competition between Asian garment-exporting countries and halt the race to the lowest wage. It would be appropriate for churches to support this and similar initiatives.

*Labour Behind the Label* supports garment workers' rights worldwide and aims to raise awareness about clothing issues, and to lobby government and

retailers. In 2009 they produced *Let's Clean Up Fashion*, which included information on the attitudes of many high street retailers.<sup>25</sup>

Retailers have some way to go to reach the standards that *Labour Behind the Label* expects. We have a responsibility to be aware of which retailers are making efforts to change, and have put in place policies that properly assist factory workers in developing countries to be properly paid for the work they do. Using research and analysis by *Labour Behind the Label* we can use our purchasing power to consider avoiding some companies, or rewarding reformed or better behaving retailers with our custom. As individuals, as congregations and as the church nationally, let retailers be aware of their concerns by speaking to staff and writing to store managers asking them to improve conditions for their workers overseas and at home.

## 6. Conclusion

We believe in and know a God who does not look at our outward appearances, but sees us for who we really are. We are becoming acutely aware of how our actions have an impact on the rest of the world. This might be in terms of our carbon footprint, or the difference that can be made by Fairtrade goods. We need to apply the same principles to the clothes we wear – and be conscious of treading lightly in environmental terms, and caring for neighbour who makes our clothes.

We have an obligation to try to ensure that the raw materials of the clothes have been produced ethically - with sensitivity to the environment, with a fair price being paid to the producer and manufacturer, and support for good practice by retailers. Campaigns which seek to improve the life of garment workers, especially those who live in developing countries or who are denied full human rights, should be loudly endorsed by the church and all groups who strive for justice and fairness.

*The biblical teaching on the goodness of creation does not contradict the other biblical themes. Possessions are dangerous, and God's people must practice self-denial to aid the poor and share the gospel. But we must maintain a biblical balance. It is not because food, clothes, wealth, and property are inherently evil that Christians today must lower their standard of living. It is because others are starving. Creation is good. But the one who gave us this gorgeous token of affection has asked us to share it with our sisters and brothers.*

Ronald Sinclair, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1997), pp. 100-101.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org/resources>

## Further Reading

Labour Behind the Label website:

[www.labourbehindthelabel.org](http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org)

The Great Cotton Stitch-Up, a November 2010 report from the Fairtrade Foundation:

[http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/get\\_involved/the\\_great\\_cotton\\_stitchup/get\\_involved/the\\_great\\_cototn\\_stitchup/the\\_great\\_cotton\\_stitch\\_up.aspx](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/get_involved/the_great_cotton_stitchup/get_involved/the_great_cototn_stitchup/the_great_cotton_stitch_up.aspx)

Modest Fashion, a project supervised by Professor Reina Lewis of the London College of Fashion, looking at faith-based fashion and internet retail, running for 12 months from February 2010:

<http://www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/modest-dressing.htm>

Resurgence Magazine, Issue 254 May/June 2009 -

*The Tyranny of Trends*, Charty Durrant, available online at

<http://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article2799-the-tyranny-of-trends.html>

*Elegant Simplicity*, Satish Kumar, available online at

<http://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article2790-elegant-simplicity.html>

*Eco Chic* by Matlida Lee published by Octopus, 2007

*No Logo* by Naomi Klein published by Flamingo, 2000

*The Thoughtful Dresser* by Linda Grant published by Virago Press, 2009

Accepted Deliverances:

- Commend church and charitable initiatives that reuse and recycle clothes, or that teach skills in how to repair clothes, and invite congregations and individuals to follow these examples.
- Urge the Church and Society Council to join ongoing campaigns that address the issues raised in this report, including the Asia Floor Wage Alliance.

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