

Mark R. Elliott

*Methodism in an Orthodox Context: History, Theology, and (Sad)ly
Politics*

Abstract

The history of Methodism and Eastern Orthodoxy goes back to the early days of Wesley and his interest in the teachings of the Greek Church Fathers. The relationship between Methodists and the Orthodox Church has gone through positive and negative periods, but the growth of the Soviet Union and the challenge of Communism placed new challenges on both groups. The emergence of the Russian Orthodox Church and its reaction to growing Protestant missions has led to new problems, although the ongoing hope is that commonalities in our theology will overcome some of the challenges of current political realities. This paper was originally presented at the United Methodist Church Eurasia-Central Asia “In Mission Together” Consultation, held in Fulton, Maryland on May 6, 2017.

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Introduction

For several years following the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, the United Methodist Church coordinated multi-million-dollar relief shipments of food and medicine to Russia, with the Russian Orthodox Church officially partnering in its distribution (Hoffman and Pridemore 2004: 470). For example, under this arrangement, between December 1991 and July 1992, four million pounds of food made its way to the former Soviet Union (Kimbrough 1995). Also in 1992, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II participated in a televised United Methodist Easter Service on Red Square in which the Patriarch gave a formal blessing for the reestablishment of the Methodist Church in Russia (Kimbrough 1995). Yet Orthodox protestors were present at that very Methodist Red Square Easter celebration, even with the head of their church in attendance. And very soon Russian Orthodox at all levels came to view Methodist presence in their midst as an affront. As Bishop Ruediger Minor put it, Orthodox quickly came to see Methodism's ministry in Russia "as just one part of... a Protestant invasion into Orthodox territory" (Kimbrough 1995: 472).

Historical Relationships

This mixed picture of an on-again, off-again Methodist-Orthodox relationship has been the case through several centuries. The story actually predates the emergence of Methodism in the 18th century, if we examine Methodist roots in the Protestant Reformation. This prehistory of Methodism entails a very fleeting, but sensational Calvinist chapter, and a much more extended and substantive Anglican chapter, with the Church of England of course, being our Methodist forbearer.

In 1620 Cyril Lukaris (1572-1638), long-time head of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Alexandria (1602-20), was elected Ecumenical Patriarch, thereby becoming the titular head of all Eastern Orthodox churches. Throughout his troubled tenure—Lukaris was elected and deposed five times—the Patriarch was buffeted by persistent and aggressive Roman Catholic attempts to either co-opt him, convert him to Catholicism, dethrone him, or intrigue with the Ottoman Sultan, the Patriarch's overlord, to engineer his execution, which in fact was his ultimate fate by strangulation.

To fend off the Vatican and the ambassadors of Catholic France and Austria in Constantinople (Istanbul), Lukaris developed very close ties with anti-Catholic Protestant ambassadors from Holland and England. The Patriarch, who had studied at Geneva, became so enamored with Calvinist theology that he wrote and published an essentially Reformed Confession of Faith (1629). It so scandalized

the Orthodox world that it led to multiple rejections in a series of Orthodox councils, culminating in its definitive repudiation in the Council of Jerusalem in 1672 (Hadjiantoniou 1961; Runciman 1968: 259-88; Ware 2004, 189-91).

In contrast, we can think of Anglican-Orthodox mutual attraction as an extended courtship that ran hot and cold over centuries, but which never quite led to the altar. As this encounter relates to Methodism, we will see that Anglican imbibing of the spiritual riches of the Church Fathers, especially Orthodoxy's Eastern Church Fathers, came in turn, to have a significant influence upon John and Charles Wesley.

Of all the descendants of the Protestant Reformation, Anglicans have been the most well disposed toward Orthodoxy. Both place great stock in apostolic succession; both have vigorously resisted papal claims to head the universal church; both, in developing their theology, have drawn heavily upon early Church Fathers; and both have refrained from proselytizing the other's members (Fouyas 1984: 34-35, 38, 40, and 67; Elliott 1993: 5-7; Campbell 1991: 12-13; Miller 1984: 5).

Since the inception of the Anglican Church in the 16th century, various of its theologians and practitioners, including Lancelot Andrewes of King James Bible fame (1555-1626), Herbert Thorndike (1598-1672), Canon of Westminster Abbey; Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667), author of *Holy Living and Holy Dying*; and William Palmer (1811-1879), advocate of Anglican-Orthodox intercommunion, articulated theological positions common to both the Church of England and the Eastern Orthodox Church, particularly through their common appropriation of the teachings of early Greek Church Fathers. Patristic writers revered by both churches include St. John Chrysostom, Macarius the Egyptian, St. John Cassian, Abba Isaiah of Scetis, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ephrem the Syrian (Fouyas 1984: 67; Kimbrough, 2002, 2005, and 2007; Miller 1984: 7, 41, 45, 49, 62, 72-73).

In such a climate it should come as no surprise that John Wesley, an ordained priest of the Anglican Church, would develop a deep and abiding appreciation for the Church Fathers, especially Eastern Fathers who also figure prominently in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition. Along with other Anglicans of his day, Wesley looked to the church of antiquity, which he sometimes characterized as "primitive Christianity," as the hoped-for source of inspiration for the renewal of Christian faith in England (Campbell 1991: 109-11). United Methodist theologian and church historian Albert Outler put great stress on the congruence between John Wesley's theological understanding and key elements of the theology of the Eastern Church Fathers (Maddox 1990: 142). Among a host of Wesley scholars who have taken up this theme in recent times we can note Randy Maddox (Responsible Grace

1984), Steve McCormick (1984), and Howard Snyder (1990). To give a concrete illustration, let's examine Wesley scholar Howard Snyder's comparison of "John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian:"

John Wesley went to Christ Church, Oxford, at the time of the early eighteenth-century patristic revival there. With others, including those in the "Holy Club," Wesley became interested in early Eastern Orthodox mystical writing, especially that of the fourth century.

In 1721, an English edition of the Homilies of Macarius was published and quickly came into Wesley's hands. From then on, both before and after Aldersgate in 1738, Wesley apparently returned periodically to Macarius. When he published his fifty-volume Christian Library around 1750, the first volume included his own substantial abridgement of a number of Macarius's fifty "Spiritual Homilies" (Snyder 1990: 55).

Ideas that Wesley and Macarius held in common included free will; teachings on perfection and sanctification (theosis in the Greek; obozhenie in Russian); the Christian as "co-laborer...with God in the work of perfection;" love as the supreme Christian virtue; and salvation freely available to all, in contrast to the Western "Augustinian idea of election and predestination" (Snyder 1990: 57).

In summing up the issue of affinity between Wesley and Macarius, Snyder writes:

I do not claim that Wesley simply "took over" this set of ideas from Macarius. Some of them he encountered elsewhere; some undoubtedly came to him through his own extensive study of Scripture; some were already present in the Anglican tradition; some were points of emphasis in the Pietist writings Wesley read (e.g., Arndt's *True Christianity* with its emphasis on the restoration of the image of God and the priority of love). But it is clear that the complex of ideas on perfection Wesley taught were at key points strikingly similar to those taught by ...Macarius and that these ideas had a particularly strong appeal to Wesley and therefore made a distinctive contribution to his doctrine of perfection. (Snyder 1990: 59)

Methodist Missions and Communism in Orthodox Territory

Turning from theology to missiology, Methodism made its first missionary foray into an Orthodox context via the Ottoman and Russian Empires in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Methodist work began in Ottoman Bulgaria in 1857, in the Russian province of Finland in 1861, from there to St. Petersburg beginning in 1888, Lithuania in 1900, Latvia in 1904, and Estonia in 1907—all this through Swedish, Finnish, German, and American Methodist mission efforts (Elliott 1991: 5). In the

wake of the October 1917 Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War (1918-21), Finland and the Baltic states gained their independence. Here Methodism continued to grow in the interwar period, but prior to World War II, not as a minority faith in an Orthodox context. Across the border in the U.S.S.R., anti-religious policies led to the suppression of Methodist work in Vladivostok by 1922, the closing of the last Methodist Church in European Russia in Leningrad in 1923, and in 1931 the flight from the Soviet Union of Anna Ecklund, the last Methodist missionary in the country (Robert 1995: 75; Dunstan 1995: 69; Kimbrough 1995: 216).

This demise of Methodism in the U.S.S.R. occurred in spite of the efforts of Methodist Bishops John L. Nuelson and Edgar Blake who lent their support to the Living Church, a schismatic offshoot of the Russian Orthodox Church that collaborated with the new Communist government. The Kremlin promoted this schismatic Orthodox body as a means of undermining the former state church. Orthodox laity, however, shunned the Living Church so completely that Soviet authorities in the mid-1920s abandoned it to a natural death. In the end, Methodist alignment with the Living Church proved counterproductive, serving primarily to further undermine the Russian Orthodox Church as it struggled to survive Lenin's and Stalin's massive assault on its very existence (Hoffman and Pridemore 2004: 468). Incidentally, *Red Priests*, the title of the best scholarly study of the Living Church, is the work of Dr. Edward Roslof (2002), perhaps the most accomplished Russian church historian among American United Methodists.

In the same interwar years that Methodist outposts in the independent Baltic States and Bulgaria survived and grew, certain ideologically minded Methodists in the West were preoccupied expounding radically contrasting evaluations of the Soviet experiment. On one extreme, Julius F. Hecker, a Methodist professor at Columbia University, wrote four positive accounts of the new regime, including *The Communist Answer to the World's Needs*, published in 1935. He moved his family to the Soviet Union and taught philosophy at Moscow State University, only to be executed in 1938 in Stalin's purges (Hecker, 1934-1935). On the other extreme, in 1936 we find Methodist pastor Rembert Gilman Smith of Oklahoma authoring a stridently anti-Communist polemic entitled *Moscow over Methodism*, and the same year launching the Methodist League against Communism, Fascism, and Unpatriotic Pacifism (Smith 1936). More or less in between were E. Stanley Jones's reflections on *Christ's Alternative to Communism* (1935), published following his 1934 foray in the U.S.S.R. This Methodist culture war in the West, which debated what should constitute the "correct" approach to Soviet Marxism, continued unabated throughout most of the 20th century until the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist. Illustrative of this ideological clash is the rhetoric of the left-leaning Methodist

Federation for Social Action (1907-) juxtaposed against the rhetoric of the right-leaning Institute on Religion and Democracy, founded in 1981 by United Methodist pastor Ed Robb and United Methodist layman and AFL-CIO official David Jessup (Robb 1986; High 1950).

Estonian Methodism

Back in the U.S.S.R. the most compelling Methodist narrative from the end of World War II to the breakup of the Soviet Union was the remarkable survival and even flourishing of Estonian Methodism. At the end of the war, Soviet authorities closed all Methodist churches in Latvia, Lithuania, and western Ukraine. Estonian Methodism declined from 26 churches and 3,100 members and adherents in 1939 to 12 churches and 700 followers in 1945. Nevertheless, the Estonian church at least managed to survive as a legal entity throughout the remainder of the Soviet era. Considerable growth occurred in the 1950s through periodic revivals, especially following the 1956 return from the Siberian Gulag of its most revered pastor, Alexander Kuum (Elliott 1991: 5-6 and 9).

New musical expressions were one fruit of a revival among Methodists in the late 1960s, which in turn, contributed to the spread of revival, especially among unchurched young people. Performances of Western Christian groups inspired imitation and led to Western gifts to young Methodist musicians of a wide range of equipment including synthesizers, amplifiers, drums, and electric guitars. Jaanus Karner of the Tallinn Methodist Church formed the first Christian rock group in the Soviet Union in 1969 (Elliott 1991: 10).

Large numbers of additional Western contacts undoubtedly provided both encouragement and a degree of protection. Dr. Harry Denman, director of the Board of Evangelism of the Methodist Church, visited Tallinn in 1956, the first-known postwar contact of the Estonian church with a Methodist from the United States. An especially dramatic break in Estonian Methodism's isolation came in September 1962 with a visit from Bishop Odd Hagen of the Northern European Central Conference of The Methodist Church, the first bishop to visit Estonia in 22 years" (Elliott 1991: 11).

Geography worked to Estonia's advantage. Tallinn is a mere 40 miles across the Gulf of Finland from Helsinki and is a port of entry for large numbers of Scandinavian and other Western tourists. The Tallinn Methodist congregation benefited from knowing and being known by large numbers of Western Christians who worshiped with them. In terms of systematic sustenance and encouragement in the 1960s, the most important Western "breathing hole," to use Bishop Ole Borgen's expression, was growing numbers of Finnish Methodist and Pentecostal

visitors using the relatively easy access of the Gulf of Finland ferry between Helsinki and Tallinn. In the 1970s and 1980s the number of contacts with Scandinavian, West European, and U.S. church and parachurch representatives, as well as with increasing numbers of Western Christian tourists, absolutely exploded (Elliott 1991: 11-12).

Leading student groups to Tallinn in 1981, 1985, and 1989, I was able to establish friendships with Estonian Methodists. Superintendent Olaf Parnamets and I were able to arrange a pastors' workshop in 1985 led by Dr. Robert Mulholland from Asbury Seminary. Subsequent workshops led by other Asbury faculty, Dr. Steve O'Malley in 1988 and Dr. David Seamands in 1989, served as the catalyst for a succession of additional guest professors which ultimately led to the founding of the Baltic Methodist Seminary in Tallinn in 1994 (Elliott 1991: 14). Unfortunately, Estonian Methodist membership of 2,363 in 1974 declined to 1,783 in 1990 due to deaths among older members, immigration of younger members, and departures for other churches, especially charismatic congregations of Scandinavian and American origin teaching a health and wealth gospel (Elliott 1991: 15 and 21). Rev. Taavi Hollman, serving as superintendent since 2005, stresses both evangelism and social outreach. These emphases, along with the work of the Baltic Methodist Seminary, underscore the continuing vitality of Estonian Methodism.

Post-Soviet Relations

Back in 1965 in one of innumerable anti-religious publications, F. I. Federenko predicted that in the near future "one should anticipate [the] complete disappearance of Methodism from the Soviet Union" (Elliott 1991: 21). Instead, what happened was that Methodism survived, but the Soviet Union did not. The gradual end of state interference in religious life under Gorbachev between 1987 and 1990 and the demise of the Soviet Union in favor of 15 new independent republics in 1991, spelled a new day for Methodism in Eurasia. New breathing space for freedom of conscience, however, did not mean freedom from mistakes. As United Methodist Bishop Ole Borgen cautioned, "It takes a strong back to carry good days" (Elliott 1991). In this new day, one miscue, from my perspective, was the decision to have the United Methodist Church partner with the Soviet Peace Fund, a sham Communist propaganda instrument with no credibility in any circle of Soviet society. For decades, churches in the U.S.S.R. had been forced against their will to contribute to the coffers of the Soviet Peace Fund, only to have this body trumpet to the West the falsehood that citizens of the U.S.S.R. enjoyed freedom of religion. United Methodist association with this Soviet relic did nothing to enhance a skeptical public's opinion of Methodism.

A second miscue, it would appear, occurred as United Methodist officials assured the Russian Orthodox Church that it would not engage in proselytism, even as individual mission-minded United Methodist congregations engaged in evangelism and church planting in Eurasia on their own initiative. Orthodox hierarchs could not believe what was the truth, that United Methodist bishops were unable to control their local churches the way Orthodox bishops certainly could control theirs. As a result, Orthodox concluded that the United Methodist Church had deceived it with its professions of fraternity at the same time that it was engaged in what Orthodox considered sheep stealing (Hoffman and Pridemore 2004: 472).

Despite these missteps, the former Soviet Union, including Estonia, is now home to over 100 United Methodist churches and fellowships. What the denomination now faces is the challenge of ministry in a political climate hostile to Western influences and in a context of ongoing Orthodox opposition.

Let me summarize key points of Orthodox opposition and then develop a case for the defense. Most Orthodox Christians believe that Methodists and other Protestants have no place in Eurasia. They view Western and Korean missionary activity as an unwelcome intrusion into a spiritual landscape nourished by over a thousand years of Byzantine Christianity (Elliott and Hill 1993).

The Russian Orthodox argument for fair play runs as follows:

1. It is true that Orthodox churches suffer from low rates of attendance;
2. But Orthodox nominalism today stems from many decades of state oppression and persecution;
3. That being the case, the most civil and Christian response for Western Protestants would be to aid the Eastern Church in getting to its feet;
4. Methodists and other Protestants should either help Orthodoxy recoup and recover, or stand aside and allow it time to regain its strength, rather than take spiritual advantage of its weakened condition.
5. Consequently, Orthodox churches should have exclusive access to the population of the former Soviet Union even as regards nominal believers and atheists.

Orthodox Christians also contend that Methodist and other Protestant missionaries have no right to invade Eastern Orthodox canonical territory. Orthodox missionaries, we are reminded, were there first. But imagine how uncomfortable Orthodox themselves would be if this argument were taken to its logical conclusion. If a faith's legitimacy were to depend upon its being longstanding or first in a particular location, then what justification did Prince Vladimir have in

suppressing an ancient pagan pantheon in favor of Orthodoxy? And what right did Orthodox missionaries in Siberia have to compete with native shamans, thereby interfering with the region's traditional religion (Elliott 1996)?

If one were to accept that a majority Christian confession first on the scene by rights should have territorial prerogatives, then Sts. Cyril and Methodius should not have begun their work in Moravia, where missionaries from Rome were already in evidence; Orthodox conversions among Estonian and Latvian Lutherans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should not have occurred; and Orthodox, who were second to Protestants and Catholics in their arrival in every U.S. state except Alaska, should cease and desist from evangelism and church planting in the other 49 states.

Missionaries working in countries with long-standing Orthodox traditions definitely need to study the regions' history and literature in order to exercise cross-cultural sensitivity and relate the gospel to the context. However, even as we come to appreciate Orthodoxy, the exceptional achievements of Slavic cultures, and the remarkable perseverance of long-suffering peoples, we should not feel constrained to abstain from, or feel apologetic for, sharing the good news in Eurasia minus Marx (Elliott 1996). United Methodists have ample room to minister to millions of Eurasians who are spiritually adrift, without ever engaging in proselytizing, that is, specifically targeting adherents of one church in an attempt to lure them into another (Elliott 1996; Elliott and Hill 1993).

In Eurasia, Orthodox and Methodists have differing definitions of proselytism because we have differing definitions of what constitutes a believer. As John Wesley's disciples, we believe faith involves a personal commitment to Christ as Savior, lived out in worship and service. In contrast, if a Russian or Ukrainian has been baptized as an infant, even if faith as an adult is dormant or non-existent, Orthodox churches consider a Methodist witness to that person to be proselytizing. Orthodox churches will even interpret a Methodist overture to admitted non-believers as proselytism. Oddly enough, such an understanding is reinforced when churchless citizens of the former Soviet Union identify themselves in public polls as Orthodox Christians, but only as a type of cultural marker (Elliott 1996). Most infamous in this regard is Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko who is on record as declaring himself to be an Orthodox atheist (Bohdan 2012).

Even as the Moscow Patriarchate insists upon its territorial prerogative, I would argue Orthodox churches actually benefit from the presence in their midst of minority Christian communities, including United Methodists, as a check on complacency. We would do well to pray for a major Russian Orthodox revival and renewal that would permit it to serve wholeheartedly as an agent of God's healing

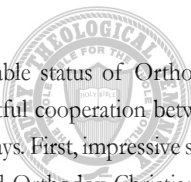
and redemption. Because Russian culture owes an enormous debt to Orthodoxy—in literature, music, and architecture, for example—many Russians likely will remain spiritually lost if a reinvigorated Orthodox Church does not reach them (Elliott and Hill 1993). At the same time, it is hard to imagine that any one Christian confession alone can reach all Eurasians for Christ. Even if the crippling legacy of the Kremlin’s interference in Orthodox Church life and its present-day collusion with secular power disappeared overnight, and even if Orthodoxy instantaneously could marshal its best efforts in a mighty spiritual renewal, millions very likely would still remain untouched. The reason is that many Eurasians find it difficult to place trust in Orthodox hierarchs who seem ever prone to submission to secular overlords.

Many citizens of post-Soviet states who yearn for more open, democratic societies do not believe that the Orthodox Church has the strength or the will to speak truth to power. Even to survive as a force in society it appears Orthodoxy requires the state to defend it against its detractors. Thus, it is not open to supporting religious tolerance for minority Protestant denominations, including Methodism, for fear of losing its preeminence. Instead, as early as the early 1990s, it chose to repeat history by retreating to its age-old dependence upon the state to provide it with a legislative advantage, if not a monopoly. On the basis of Europe’s sad experience with state churches, it would appear that nothing could be more deadening to Orthodox spiritual vitality than external state supports propping up a privileged church (Elliott and Corrado 1997). That is why United Methodists and other minority churches in Eurasia, if given the chance, could render Orthodoxy a service by preventing it from succumbing to the calcifying consequences of monopoly status.

Just as the Protestant Reformation spurred reform within Roman Catholicism, so Methodists and other Protestants have the potential of saving Orthodoxy from the torpor that a privileged legal status engenders. That was the case in tsarist Russia where Protestant growth in a given region often helped reenergize Orthodox Christians out of their state church stupor (Elliott and Hill 1993). As church historian Martin Marty has noted, “Challengers of the status quo can provide ‘great stimulus for communities to define themselves’ and ‘to revitalize stagnant cultures’” (Elliott and Corrado 1997).

Conclusion

Despite the unenviable status of Orthodox-Methodist relations at the official level, instances of fruitful cooperation between Orthodox and Methodists have occurred in at least two ways. First, impressive scholarship has been undertaken in the West by Methodists and Orthodox Christians under the able leadership of



Dr. S.T. Kimbrough, Jr., former Executive Secretary of Mission Evangelism of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries. In 1995 Dr. Kimbrough published a very helpful edited volume on Methodism in Russia and the Baltic States; *History and Renewal*. In the next decade Dr. Kimbrough edited three additional volumes drawn from academic conferences of Orthodox and Wesleyan scholars that he organized in 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2007. Here we find a wealth of evidence based on careful scholarship documenting a significant amount of common ground between Orthodox and Wesleyan theology. Father Thomas Hopko, dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, in his forward to the first of the three conference volumes, noted the return in recent years of Methodists and Orthodox to the sources of their respective traditions and the striking similarities to be uncovered between the two traditions (Kimbrough 2002: 7). Students of Methodist history owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Kimbrough for bringing to press these thought-provoking and revealing historical and theological studies.

Another United Methodist scholar, Dr. Thomas Oden, superintended an additional academic project that involved contributions from an impressive constellation of United Methodist, other Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic theologians. I am speaking of the massive 29-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (2001-2006) that brings together reflections on each book of the Bible drawn from patristic authors of the first seven centuries of the Christian era (Oden 2001-2006).

Though less common than one would hope, another form of fruitful Methodist-Orthodox cooperation has taken place at the congregational level. As an example, in 2006 and 2008, Clemson United Methodist Church, Clemson, South Carolina, assisted in building a new Orthodox church and helped in the restoration of another in the Kostroma Diocese, several hundred miles northeast of Moscow. In both instances, Father Georgi Edelstein, the Russian Orthodox priest in both parishes, has, in turn, been a blessing to United Methodist short-term missionaries as he has shared with them spiritual truths with universal applications. In thanking Methodist team members for their help, Father Georgi explained on one occasion, "It is good to restore the church building, but it is more important to restore the soul."

The task ahead is the restoring of souls in a land still reeling from the negative consequences of the Soviet Union's massive assault on faith. In closing, may we all be renewed in our covenant to be part of the Lord's work by heeding the lesson of a Jewish folk tale told to me many years ago by Dr. Peter Kuzmic, president of the Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek, Croatia. The story goes that four angels were eyewitnesses to creation. The first awe-struck angel said, "Lord, your

creation is beautiful. How did you do it?" The question of a scientist. The second angel said, "Lord, your creation is beautiful. Why did you do it?" The question of a philosopher. The third angel said, "Lord your creation is beautiful. Can I have it?" The question of a materialistic, fallen angel. Then the fourth angel said, "Lord, your creation is beautiful. Can I help?" The question of a faithful servant. Let us all resolve to keep uppermost this last question, "Lord, can I help?"

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