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The Place of Theology in Diversity Efforts in Christian
Higher Education: A Wesleyan Perspective

Abstract:

Theology is essential to diversity efforts in Christian Higher Education. In current culture there are at least two ways in which theology emerges in this work, as an afterthought and as foundational in some instances. In this article the author provides a discussion around the question: Does theology have a place in the work of diversity efforts in Christian higher education? This paper asserts that theology is a critical and, significant contributor in diversity as it relates to these efforts taking place across Christian Higher Education in North America. A Wesleyan theological perspective is utilized to demonstrate how Wesleyan theology can speak into diversity efforts in Christian higher education.

Keywords: diversity, higher education, Wesleyan theology, Christian education, intercultural studies

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Introduction

Does theology have a place in the work of diversity efforts in Christian higher education? This paper asserts that theology is a critical and significant contributor in diversity as it relates to these efforts taking place across Christian Higher Education in North America. A Wesleyan theological perspective will be utilized to demonstrate how Wesleyan theology can speak into diversity efforts in Christian higher education. Literature indicates that the work of diversity in Christian higher education has gained prominence in the last fifteen or so years; it has gained significant momentum due to the cultural changes we experience in race relations across North America today.

Recent establishments in the CCCU (Consortium for Christian Colleges and Universities) for the support and resourcing of this work have come in the form of the Commission of Diversity and Inclusion, which was formed in 2015. In intercultural Studies, the area of contextualization has highlighted the importance of attending to cultural contexts as they inform the practices and experiences of individuals and communities. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be placed on diversity as it relates to creating a space for persons of different cultures and ethnicities in our institutions of higher education. While this notion may appear unnecessary because the common understanding is that all people are welcome here in essence, while the written understanding of our practices may reflect differently. Noel B. Woodbridge in his article "Living Theologically" writes,

> "Living theologically" sounds like a contradiction in terms, rather like constructive criticism or servantleadership. The question arises: What has theology to do with everyday life? Stevens (1995:4) claims that, in general, people today do not have any idea of what theology has to do with everyday life. Theology is often considered an abstract discipline. It is rational, reducible to propositions and capable of being categorised (liberal, conservative, evangelical, Reformed, liberation). It is not usually thought of as practical. People in business, law, the professions and the trades often regard the study of theology as a process of becoming progressively irrelevant. In the context of contemporary theological education, many educators at universities and seminaries are concerned that today's theological students are leaving theological institutions and entering the ministry with a fragmented theology instead of an integrated theology. At these institutions there is a tendency to deal

with theology in an abstract and fragmented manner, rather than in a way that integrates theology into everyday life.¹

With increasing pluralism, we experience theology being guestioned. One must understand that pluralism is the existence of multiple and multiplex cultures, ethnicities, philosophies, ideologies, practices etc. As an individual who grew up as a Wesleyan in a pluralistic cultural context, I come to this work with the understanding that the existence of pluralism does not minimize the place of theology, however it shares the platform with other religions, cultures, ethnicities so on and so forth. As Woodbridge has very plainly explained that people in the fields of business, law, the professions and the trades often regard theology as irrelevant, my observation is that the people who believe in this theology are questioning its relevance as well, as they see theology being questioned and critiqued for being irrelevant to everyday life. Is theology able to speak to the current culture we are experiencing in North America? Woodbridge brings to our attention the concern that many of our institutions tend to deal with theology in an abstract manner rather than in a manner that addresses its relevance in everyday life. Woodbridge concludes in his article, "theology and life are linked in praise (orthodoxy), action (orthopraxy) and passion (orthopathy)." The importance of theology in everyday life must gain our attention otherwise it will truly become progressively irrelevant as Woodbridge claims.

In our North American context pluralism challenges, us in ways that causes us to either defend our beliefs or shut ourselves to the world, so we are able to maintain our beliefs with little to no dialogue with each other amidst deep cultural, religious, philosophical, and ideological differences. John Inazu in his book *Confident Pluralism* claims,

Our shared existence is not only possible, but also necessary. Confident Pluralism offers a political solution to the practical problem of our deep differences. Instead of the elusive goal of *E pluribus unum*, it suggests a more modest possibility—that we can live together in our "many-ness." That vision does not entail Pollyannaish illusions that we will overcome our differences and live happily ever after. We will continue to struggle with those whose views we regard as irrational, immoral, or even dangerous. We are stuck with the good, the bad, the ugly of pluralism. Yet confident pluralism remains possible in both law and society. Confident

pluralism takes both confidence and pluralism seriously. Confidence without pluralism misses the reality of politics. It suppresses difference, sometimes violently. Pluralism without confidence misses the reality of people. It ignores or trivializes our stark differences for the sake of feigned agreement and false unity. Confident pluralism allows genuine difference to coexist without suppressing or minimizing our firmly held convictions. We can embrace pluralism precisely because we are confident in our own beliefs, and in the groups and institutions that sustain them.2

John Inazu draws an important conclusion, confidence without pluralism misses the reality of politics, it suppresses difference, sometimes violently. Pluralism without confidence misses the reality of people. It ignores or trivializes our stark differences for the sake of feigned agreement and false unity. In essence Woodbridge and Inazu help us understand that culture and theology share an important integrated relationship not a fragmented one. An emphasis on one at the exclusion of the other can prove to be dangerous akin to the words found in James 2:14-17 (NRSV), "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Theology and culture can work together to benefit the common good. Thus, pluralism is not an elimination of theology from the marketplace but an acknowledgement of the existence of multiple and multiplex cultures, ethnicities, philosophies, ideologies, practices, etc. and an opportunity to become confident in our own beliefs, and in the groups and institutions that sustain them as Inazu states. I am able to confirm such a position due to my experience of growing up in Mumbai. I grew amidst friends from a plethora of religions. This did not minimize or diminish the value of my religious belief, but only enhanced my understanding and embracing of it. When we encounter difference, whether cultural or religious, we are overcome with fear largely due to the unknown nature of the difference we experience. Instead of beginning with fear we should consider taking the first step as understanding the lived reality of the other.

Diversity in Christian Higher Education: A close encounter

With the theoretical framework of near theologizing, this section will discuss a close encounter with diversity in a Christian higher education institution. Near Theologizing derives its origin from the anthropological understandings of experience-near and experience-distant.

Near and Far Theologizing is based on the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's understanding of two primary ways for understanding other cultures--experience-near and experience-distant. Geertz explains,

"An experience-near concept is, roughly, one that someone—...in our case an informant—might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel think, imagine and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another—an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist--employ to forward their scientific, philosophical or practical aims."

When I began my work at Asbury University in 2002 2.7% of the student population reflected cultures and ethnicities other than Caucasian. Now in 2019, 17%⁴ of the student population reflects cultures and ethnicities other than Caucasian. In *The Christian Post*, an article titled, "Christian Higher Ed Becoming Less White, More Diverse in Effort to Reflect God's Kingdom"⁵ it is said,

While most Christian colleges in the United States have been predominantly white institutions, there is an ongoing movement within Christian higher education to diversify student and faculty bodies to ensure that the diversity in God's Kingdom is reflected in His schools. More than eight out of 10 students (82.2 percent) who attended schools affiliated with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities in 1999 were white. But today, the white students on the nearly 140 campuses affiliated with the CCCU in the United States only account for about six out of every 10 students (62.2 percent in 2016).

What does this mean? It means Asbury and other Christian higher education institutions must work to cultivate a climate that is hospitable to its members both from home and around the world. There are needs particular to the intercultural student community. An intercultural student

community is comprised of international and U.S. ethnic minority students. International students have particular needs as it relates to moving to another country for education such as housing, employment, etc., while the needs of U.S. ethnic minorities vary in regard to having a sense of belonging at predominantly white institutions. The U.S. ethnic minorities are insiders, but experience life as outsiders to their own home context in North America. In his book, Neither Jew Nor Gentile, George Yancey states,

> The relative lack of students of color within these institutions of higher education indicates that these institutions are potentially sites that are not welcoming to [students of color]. If this type of de facto rejection is an accurate reality for these students of color, then they may have fewer educational choices than majority group students. Those who desire a Protestant éducational experience in an atmosphere where they perceive racial acceptance have to find a racially diverse Protestant institution, which is relatively difficult.7

Often times the lack of a hospitable campus is due to the lack of intentional efforts in creating such a climate for all students. It cannot be assumed that places of Christian higher education are automatically hospitable. Often times it is quite the contrary. In my work in Christian higher education I have discovered nice people does not equate to people who understand cultural and ethnic differences. Not seeing color or the culture of the other does not translate to what we commonly think it does, we all are valued, it is quite the contrary, not seeing or recognizing the color or the culture of the other actually means we do not value the other as an integrated individual made up of their culture and ethnicity, rather we view them as fragmented as Woodbridge points out in the case with students who are leaving theological institutions and entering ministry with a fragmented theology. Often this reality is regarded or even understood as being colorblind, but being colorblind does not eradicate racial prejudice. More often than not being colorblind is dangerous and a great threat to our ability to value the other in our midst. We deal with culture and ethnicity in an abstract and fragmented manner rather than recognizing that people are a sum of their cultural contexts.

Miroslav Volf in his book, A Public Faith acknowledges the malfunctions of theology when it comes to relating with others from cultures and ethnicities other than our own. He states.

In the course of Christianity's long history-full of remarkable achievements by its saints and thinkers, artists and builders, reformers and ordinary folks—the Christian faith has sometimes failed to live up to its own standards as a prophetic religion. Too often, it neither mends the world nor helps human beings thrive. To the contrary, it seems to shatter things into pieces, to choke up what is new and beautiful before it has a chance to take root, to trample underfoot what is good and true. When this happens, faith is no longer a spring of fresh water helping good life to grow lushly, but a poisoned well, more harmful to those who drink its waters than any single vice could possibly be—as Friedrich Nietzsche, a fierce critic of Christianity, put in his last and angrily prophetic book, *The Anti- Christ*. True, some of faith's damaging effects can be attributed largely to differences of perspectives.8

Such a malfunction is quite likely when we have an abstract approach to theology rather than one rooted in lived reality. Approaching people apart from their lived reality does not give us a comprehensive understanding of who they are, instead it allows us to think of them from our perspective rather than theirs. Theology has valuable contributions to make in diversity efforts in Christian higher education. The place of theology in diversity efforts in Christian higher education becomes more important as theology can serve as a corrective to cultural malfunction and vice versa, a corrective to theological malfunction we experience in our world today. Over the years I have witnessed several instances that indicate the lack of cultural awareness and understanding. Adel S. Abadeer in his article, "Seeking Redemptive Diversity in Christian Institutions of Higher Education: Challenges and Hopes from Within" claims,

Christian institutions should apply the biblical redeemed foundations of implementing diversity: diversity that welcomes and celebrates with the redeemed spheres in other cultures. They should be proactive in reforming their cultures and engaging with other worldly cultures, since the world itself belongs to God (Plantinga, 2002). They should implement diversity that is transforming, leading by example in response to their new creation as collective units of faithful servants and active agents of renewal. Such diversity should be integrated in their mission statements, curriculum, education, training, employment, leadership, membership, and community services, in addition to concerts, exhibits, galleries, choirs, public lectures, and conferences, as an ongoing process/ journey that

is associated with a significant learning curve effect, which in turn deepens and enriches the institution's diversity. Furthermore, Christian institutions should revisit and evaluate their existing diversity programs, practices, and progress on a regular basis, to build on their achievements and learn from their short- comings so as to enhance their effectiveness in the future.9

Abadeer points out that, Christian institutions should apply the biblical redeemed foundations of implementing diversity: diversity that welcomes and celebrates with the redeemed spheres in other cultures. For the most part we could all agree on the non-redeemed spheres in cultures such as slavery, and political and economic corruption to name a few. How do we get to a place where we can welcome and celebrate the redeemed spheres in other cultures? I remain perplexed at the words found in Matthew 22: 36- 40 (NRSV), "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." The emphasis on loving our neighbors as ourselves is second to loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. There is no exception made to loving our neighbors; loving God is followed by loving neighbors. Celebrating the redeemed spheres of other cultures includes celebrating the other in these redeemed spheres of cultures.

As we review the writings of George Marsden in, *The Soul of the* American University, Glanzer, Alleman and Ream's, Restoring the Soul of the University, or Karen Longman's edited work, Diversity Matters we discover institutions of Christian higher education struggling to discover their moral and ethical compass as they navigate the winds of cultural change, not that theology cannot withstand these winds of cultural change. Our interpretations and applications of the very theology we embody are being challenged by the cultural changes as they relate to race relations. An important question is raised in the work of Glanzer, Alleman and Ream, they state,

> According to the common telling of the history of the university, the early universities in Europe and then in America supposedly always had a singular soul- an identity and story that held them together and gave a coherent unity. In fact, scholars discussing what it would mean for a university to have singular soul usually refer

to the older medieval universities as an example. In this view, God supplied the soul, or more particularly, the study of God -theology-supplied it. In contrast, we argue that the mistake of many Christians is the belief that since universities in Europe and colleges in America began in a dominant Christian era that the early structures of how the soul of theology informed the university were somehow closer to the ideal of what a university should be. We wonder if the recent growth of classical education seems to reflect this assumption. We thus contend that Christians need to think critically about past educational structures and institutions they helped to build and perhaps where they were wrong. 10'

Glanzer, Alleman and Ream identify an important task that needs our attention, we must think critically about past educational structures and institutions they helped to build and perhaps where they were wrong. We simply cannot assume that since universities in Europe and colleges in America began in a dominant Christian era that the early structures of how the soul of theology informed the university were somehow closer to the ideal of what a university should be. The foundations for diversity initiatives in Christian higher education have their strongest support in theology however, to uncover this support one must be willing to struggle with lived reality (culture) and theology simultaneously. Shirley Hoogstra says, "those working in Christian higher education understand the theological imperative of viewing diversity as a gift to be celebrated through our common commitment to Christ and his kingdom. Though we might come from different denominations and experiences, we share a bold and historic belief that unites us: Christ crucified and resurrected."11 Did our past educational structures and institutions view diversity as a gift to be celebrated through our common commitment to Christ and his kingdom? Perhaps we did in part, and mission history could demonstrate so? I went to St. Xavier's College a Jesuit institution for undergraduate studies. I remember my experience being a rich one. My education was rich because I got to study authors from all around the world including India, unlike the experience of many students in North America who do not receive exposure to scholars from around the world. A significant majority of the educational experience in North America is Eurocentric, from pedagogy to authors whose books are the primary texts for classes.

A Wesleyan View

Campbell and Burns begin their work, Wesleyan Essentials with the following understanding,

> We are challenged "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" in the context of a multicultural society. It is a daunting challenge. Beliefs we once thought universal, and authorities (like the Bible) to which we once appealed as givens, cannot be taken for granted. It is also an exciting challenge. Christ has called us to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). This challenge no longer requires a passport or a visa: "the nations are at hand."¹²

Cultural and ethnic diversity in North America is advancing at a rapid pace. We are living in a multicultural society and working alongside individuals from a myriad of cultures and ethnicities. This requires that we learn to engage with the cultural and ethnic differences without compromise on the confident or the pluralism as identified by Jon Inazu; confidence without pluralism misses the reality of politics. It suppresses difference, sometimes violently. Pluralism without confidence misses the reality of people. It ignores or trivializes our stark differences for the sake of feigned agreement and false unity. Confident pluralism allows genuine difference to coexist without suppressing or minimizing our firmly held convictions. We can embrace pluralism precisely because we are confident in our own beliefs, and in the groups and institutions that sustain them.

In Wesley's ministry we observe a twofold emphasis, his unrelenting commitment to the Christian faith and Christian living. Randy Maddox in his book, Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism states,

> The place to begin discerning Wesley's approach to theology is with his conception of its purpose. Wesley understood theology to be intimately related to Christian living and the proclamation of Christian faith. Theology is actualized in authentic living and true proclamation. He had little interest in theology for its own sake. Rather, theology was for the purpose of transforming personal life and social relations. This was his "practical divinity." For Wesley, theology was not so much for the purpose of understanding life as for changing life; theology should help effect the love of God and neighbor. 13

Does our theology help effect the love of God and neighbor? Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. Culture and Theology are not mutually exclusive but are mutually inclusive. When one becomes a Christian, they do not automatically lose their cultural identity. Over time they discern those parts of their cultural identity and practices that do not align with biblical understanding. I am a fourth generation Christian from India, one of the cultural practices that immediately ceded upon conversion for my great grandparents was idol worship. What continued on was their respect for their parents and elders, which is congruent with scriptures. Exodus 20:12 (NRSV) states, "honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." While Hebrews 13:17 (NRSV)states, "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you." We live in a creative tension of upholding both theology and culture however, if we do it right, we will find ourselves honoring both God and neighbor. The wrong will correct itself as long as our interactions with the culturally and ethnically other are genuine and authentic because theology is actualized in authentic living and true proclamation.

Campbell and Burns examine three reasons why they find Wesleyan theology relevant for multicultural society. The reasons include the following:

Wesleyan understanding of Christian faith involves a rich understanding of God's gifts to the whole world. Wesleyan understanding of the gospel involves the claim that our own culture and society, as well as others, stands under God's judgement. Wesleyan understanding of the gospel makes a clear distinction between what is essential for the Christian faith, and what is nonessential. 14

Wesley understands God's grace was for all people everywhere. Therefore, a Wesleyan theological approach would call on a careful consideration of other cultural traditions including our own. It would also affirm that all cultures, societies and ethnicities of the world stand under God's judgment including our own. Finally, a Wesleyan theological understanding distinguishes between essentials and nonessentials of the Christian faith. They are identified as, "belief in the in the final authority of scripture, and belief in the Holy Trinity. Particular customs of worship,

he held to be "opinions" rather than essentials." 15 Where we miss the mark when it comes to diversity efforts is that we use our cultural and ethnic architype as the cornerstone by which to compare all other cultures and ethnicities.

Conclusion

Christian higher education in North America stands at the crossroads of navigating the relationship between culture and theology as it relates to diversity efforts, specifically as it relates to creating a space for persons of different cultures and ethnicities in our institutions of higher education. While this navigation is challenging work, it can be done. This paper sought to assert that theology is a critical and significant contributor in diversity efforts in Christian higher education. With the use of the theoretical framework, experience-near, and significant contributions of scholars, a discussion on diversity in Christian higher education shed light on the reality that persons of different cultures and ethnicities must be understood in light of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Culture and ethnicity cannot be dealt with in an abstract and fragmented manner as it is an integral part of one's identity. Outside the chapel at Asbury University are the famous words of E. Stanley Jones, graduate of the school and missionary to India, "here we enter a fellowship, sometimes we will agree to differ, always we will resolve to love and unite to serve." Diversity may require that we sometimes agree to differ, but not at the expense of dehumazing the other simply because they are culturally and ethnically different. This is where theology is absolutely critical as it beckons us to love our neighbor as ourselves in the midst of our differences.

A few key reminders we can take away towards this end are; the understanding that the Christian faith involves a rich understanding of God's gifts to the whole world. Understanding that the gospel involves the claim that our own culture and society, as well as others, stands under God's judgement. Understanding the essentials and nonessentials of the Christian faith. I was recently at a store in Lexington and came across the Special Time Edition magazine, it caught my attention because on the cover page a few of the articles were mentioned. One of the articles mentioned was, What Makes Us Moral. Primarily the idea that being good, even altruistic, is something all societies value. As I read through the article, I started to reckon with the discussion that was laid out in it because it dealt with our capacity as human beings to be altruistic as well as atrocious. In

one breath we would run into danger to help the other and in another we would turn around and harm or destroy the other. Why is this so? David Buss, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas is quoted in the article as saying, "the stuff that makes us who we are ---our capacity for kindness and generosity, as well as for greed and violence—exists in each of us because these abilities conferred some reproductive advantage on our forebears. Our inherent human nature has adaptations that evolved to be beneficial not from a moral sense, but from a fitness sense"16 referring to the concept of the survival of the fittest. When we experience danger, we turn to atrocious behaviors in dealing with others, this is compounded when we are dealing with the other, who is culturally and ethnically different from the self. The culturally and ethnically different is seen as the enemy. Scripture has something to say about this, the words in Luke 6: 27-31 (NRSV), "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." Theology, our understanding of God and God's word has immeasurable significance in providing a corrective to our atrocious malfunctions.

Scott J. Jones, in his book John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture highlights the importance of the text speaking to the context and the context speaking to the text. He says, "what a person says about scripture is one thing. What that same person does with scripture is a separate matter. It is not enough simply to quote a theologian's words about scripture without asking whether his or her use is congruent with those stated views. The words about scripture are called the 'conception,' and what is actually done with scripture is called its 'use'."17 Wesley relied on experience in addition to scripture, reason, and tradition in the interpretation and use of scripture however, the way Wesley used experience in scriptural interpretation is helpful for our purposes. Jones states, // Wesley relies on experience to describe the physical world. Second, Wesley occasionally makes a survey of the religious state of the world, third, he appeals to experience to give us knowledge of our own spiritual states."18 We must not encourage theology to go on as fragmented as though it has no implications on our everyday life. Theology has significant implications for our everyday living if we believe theology is for the purpose of transforming personal life and social

relations. Moving forward, theology must include the understanding of the physical world, a survey of the religious state of the world and the knowledge of our own spiritual states. Integrated theology should include a survey of the other as well as a survey of the self. When we engage in integrated theology, we will recognize the valuable insights theology can provide in the diversity efforts in Christian higher education.

End Notes

- ¹ Noel B. Woodbridge, "Living Theologically."
- ² Jon Inazu, Confident Pluralism, 6-7.
- ³ Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge, 57.
- ⁴ Asbury University profile, https://www.asbury.edu/about/ university-profile/
- ⁵ S. Smith, "Christian Education," https://www.christianpost.com/news/christian-higher-ed-becoming-less-white-more-diverse-effort-reflectgod-kingdom.html
 - 6 Ibid.
 - ⁷ George Yancey, Neither Jew Nor Gentile, 4.
 - ⁸ Miroslav Volf, A Public Faith, 4.
- ⁹ Adel S. Abadeer, "Seeking Redemptive Diversity in Christian Institutions of Higher Education: Challenges and Hopes from Within."
- ¹⁰ Perry Glanzer, Nathan F. Alleman and Todd C. Ream, Restoring the Soul of The University, 7.
 - ¹¹ Karen Longman, *Diversity Matters*, 5.
- ¹² Ted Campbell and Michael Burns, Wesleyan Essentials in a Multicultural Society, 5.
- ¹³ Randy Maddox, Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism, 35.
- 14 Ted Campbell and Michael Burns, Wesleyan Essentials in a Multicultural Society, 11-12.

15 Ibid.

 $^{\rm 16}$ Markham Heid, "The Roots of Good and Evil." Time Special Edition, 18.

¹⁷ Scott J. Jones, John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture, 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 176-177.

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