

Children of the Sixties: Post-Secular Victorian Studies and Victorian Secularization Theory

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Steve Bruce's *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (2011) is good evidence, starting with its title, of the embattled status of various secularization theses, those arguments that link the advent of modernity to forms of religious decline. The 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century featured a number of studies that challenged or qualified these secularization narratives, and Bruce's book, inspired by the relative success of those studies, worries over the potential consequences of rearing a new generation of scholars inattentive to the reality of what he takes to be the massively diminished profile of religion in "modern industrial liberal democracies" (3-4). As the author of a book – *The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774-1880* (2007) – incited by a countervailing frustration with the habitual coordination of our literary histories of the nineteenth century with a general notion of declining religion, I find it useful, here on the threshold of this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, to pause over Bruce's most recent defense of the "secularization paradigm" (1).

Bruce, a sociologist, presents secularization in the context of long-term historical change and a rapid final dash to a modernity that was first widely experienced in industrialized urban areas of Western Europe and Britain in particular in the nineteenth century. Over the long run, Bruce sees the turn to monotheism documented by the Hebrew Bible as an important first step in a "process of ethical rationalization" otherwise im-

peded in polytheistic societies where mercurial gods interacted and even interbred with humans (28). From this starting point – remarkably distant for a process identified with modernity – secularization then develops in multiple ways under the auspices of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, an event portrayed as a rejection of non-rational practices and beliefs characteristic of Medieval Christendom. Moreover, the Reformation newly emphasized an individualism that could be credited with worldly success as a sign of pious labor rewarded. And while the multiple Christian confessions of the post-Reformation West were initially the causes of violence and persecution, this religious diversity more importantly leads in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries to the articulation of an ideal of tolerance that will eventually divest non-conformity and purported heterodoxy or heresy of onerous civil penalties. With a declining belief in magic and witchcraft, the waning of supernatural and theocratic ideals of political sovereignty, and scientific and technological advances based on the exploitation of constant natural laws, nineteenth-century Britain, in this scheme, is home to a new, truly modern individual at liberty to select a religious identity in a world where many options exist. The absence of “authoritarian” or even “authoritative assertions” about religious truth endows a relativism that “debilitates faith” (47). Increasingly large numbers will abandon religion altogether or maintain nominal faiths that come with few demands on time, treasure, or conduct.

“[T]he secularization paradigm,” as Bruce puts it, “argues that the decline of religion in the West ... is an unintended consequence of complex social changes that for brevity we can call modernization” (56). And in the case of Britain, this modernity is supposed to be visible in the mid-nineteenth century. This larger story, once widely favored by sociologists of religion, Bruce defends against a range of different objections, but it is this issue of timing that should be of most interest to scholars of the nineteenth century. For the idea of an increasingly secular Victorian period now noticeably jars with a new consensus among church historians and historians more generally that the real debate about the stages and timing

of religious decline in Britain is located, if anywhere, in the twentieth century and its aftermath.

S.J.D. Green's *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c.1920-1960* (2011), for instance, is a formidable criticism of what its author fears could be a new false orthodoxy represented by Callum G. Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* which first appeared in 2001 and was republished in a second, expanded edition in 2009. Green and Brown agree that British society today is remarkably secular when compared to all earlier periods. They also essentially agree that the critical decade for the birth of today's dominant secularity was the 1960s. But where Brown sees the events of that decade as a sudden break that had followed an ultimately doomed and (later) partially forgotten religious revival in the 1950s, Green sees them as the culmination of fairly steady changes that had been underway since the 1920s. The point I want to emphasize is that these two different accounts of the route to the 1960s share in common a belief in the vigor and vitality of religion throughout Victorian and Edwardian times. The debate between Green and Brown takes place among the ruins of an earlier generation's version of secularization that was said to be sapping religion's defensive ramparts one hundred years earlier.¹

My own general criticism of any unambiguous nineteenth-century setting for secularization (as religious decline) in the *English Cult of Literature* encountered no public resistance, so I won't rehearse here the reasons that encouraged me to question the utility of this model for literary scholars in particular. But I do want to confess that I came to regret the utter lack of controversy on this matter. While researching and writing the book I had thought I had been charting new waters. The reviews suggested I had been watching the tides change.² So too did the contemporary appearance of other literary studies, such as Colin Jager's *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (2007), with serious hesitations about the conventional secularization paradigm. Of course scholars still productively work on secularism and the secular

in a Victorian context. One thinks, for instance, of George Levine's *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (2006) and his related collection of essays *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* (2008). But these works unintentionally confirm how secularism has generally evolved in at least one part of the academy in the past fifty years: starting as a primary explanatory model for the nineteenth century and its signal cultural products, it has increasingly become a recognizable stance in an intellectual tradition that can be traced, and no one does so with more satisfaction than Levine, to the Victorian period. Victorian secularists there were, but they were a sect, one among many. As Adelene Buckland put it in her review of the essays, "the Victorians [Levine] is most deeply impressed by are always the realists, the positivists, the naturalists. These, of course, hardly represent the Victorians in total. The readings here are unashamedly partisan, and they circulate around a limited number of works" (116).³

Most historians, I believe, no longer approach nineteenth-century Britain in terms of a broadly based religious decline. And many contemporary sociologists of religion are engaged in work inspired by a sense that ours is a post-secular, globalized age.⁴ More and more literary critics are following the lead, particularly scholars of the nineteenth century. It was once common to think of nineteenth-century literary authority being constructed in cultural spaces vacated by religion, but critics such as Mark Knight, Emma Mason and others are elucidating how "the doctrinal intricacies of the Church were experienced" through a wide array of literary texts including "hymns, tracts, poetry, and fiction" (7). My own book argued that "literary sacralization" in the nineteenth century "is, on somewhat paradoxical terms, coordinated with a process of political secularization" (30), a process that is not, I contend, necessarily an occasion for religion's dwindling profile.

If all this is generally valid it seems proper to ask why nineteenth-century studies were indeed so closely wedded to the secularization paradigm not long ago. One reason, that initially appeared obvious to me, is the fact that that paradigm was a Victorian invention, an invention of

nineteenth-century prose. There are famous instances of life writing by Victorian luminaries, such as Darwin's *Autobiography*, narrating farewells to Christianity. More importantly, there are less personal instances of Victorian historical and social criticism that conveyed or contained something like modern secularization theory. In what follows I draw attention to versions of the secularization thesis from the 1860s and 1880s. But I do so to explain ultimately how twentieth-century academics largely passed over this tradition of Victorian secularization theory in favor of analyses that were less obviously embedded in nineteenth-century political and religious debates. Twentieth-century secularization theory, I argue, thereby became enshrined as a finding of academically chartered social sciences, and it earned these credentials in the 1960s, the period when (if you agree with Brown and Green) Britain and, to a lesser extent, the US were taking a secular turn.

The sociological argument defended by Bruce, for example, essentially reiterates the story told in W.E.H. Lecky's *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (2 vols, 1st edition, 1865), a popular work throughout the century that deserved, so said the *Edinburgh Review*, to "take its place among the best literary productions of the age" (455). Describing over the course of two millennia of history a declining sense of the miraculous, traditions of religious persecution giving way to toleration, and a rising understanding of natural laws and mechanical contrivance, Lecky's narrative is an account of a modernity that is a break from Roman Catholic Medieval culture and a development of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and its sequel (what we call) the Enlightenment. What distinguishes it from histories of enlightenment from the previous century is its long culminating chapter, "The Industrial History of Rationalism," which hails the ascendancy of modern political economy as the day's most important contribution "towards the realisation of the great Christian conception of universal peace" (2.336):

It [modern political economy] teaches, in the first place, that the notion that a commercial nation can only prosper by the loss of its neighbour, is essentially false. It teach-

es still further that each nation has a direct interest in the prosperity of that with which it trades, just as a shopman has an interest in the wealth of his customers. It teaches too that the different markets of the world are so closely connected, that it is quite impossible for a serious derangement to take place in any one of them without its evil effects vibrating through all; and that, in the present condition of Europe, commercial ties are so numerous, and the interests of nations so closely interwoven, that war is usually an evil even to the victor. (2.339)

“Liberty, industry, and peace are in modern societies indissolubly connected,” writes Lecky, “and their ultimate ascendancy depends upon a movement which may be retarded, but cannot possibly be arrested” (2.341). Lecky’s notion of progress was explicitly grounded in modes of production, products, and their distribution.⁵ But Lecky also insisted that the rise of rationalism in Europe and its material consequences were accompanied by the spread of the “true Christianity” of “the New Testament” – if not the dogmas and prejudices of “ecclesiastical historians” (1.200-201). When Lecky speaks about the “secularisation ... of political life” and “the general secularisation of the European intellect” (1.20, 79), he is not talking about religious decline, but the liberalization of politics (including political science) and theology.

Lecky’s liberal sense of providence was deeply involved with a belief that the long history of post-classical European conflict could culminate in confrontations between theocratic or authoritarian regimes animated by “the admiration of military glory” and liberal states where productive intellectual and commercial pursuits were encouraged and celebrated (2.341). The same conflict would be theorized at great length in Herbert Spencer’s *The Principles of Sociology* (3 vols, 1876-1896) which describes how different societies at different times exhibit characteristics of two opposing types, “the predominantly militant and the predominantly industrial” (1.538). Part VI of that work, *Ecclesiastical Institutions* (1883), focuses on the rise and progress of priesthoods and, in the pro-

cess, it provides another representative installment of Victorian secularization theory. Spencer contends that the powers, coercive and otherwise, of evolved priesthoods are eroded by the changes and developments that bring about modern industrial societies. History provides many examples of spiritual and temporal power being coordinated (as they still were in limited ways in Britain in the 1880s and after), and this same historical record reveals many instances in which temporal powers were dominated by or collapsed into spiritual powers. But in advanced societies "spiritual power[s]" were subjected to "temporal power[s]." This follows "the development of industrialism" and

...the modification of nature caused by substitution of a life carried on under voluntary co-operation for a life carried on under compulsory co-operation – the transition from a social state in which obedience to authority is the supreme virtue, to a social state in which it is a virtue to resist authority when it transgresses prescribed limits. This modification of nature proceeds from that daily habit of insisting on self-claims while respecting the claims of others, which the system of contract involves the questioning habit having once commenced, sacerdotal inspiration comes to be doubted, and the power flowing from belief in it begins to wane. With this moral change has to be joined an intellectual change, also indirectly resulting from development of industrial life. That spreading knowledge of natural causation which conflicts with, and gradually weakens, belief in supernatural causation, is consequent on development of the industrial arts. (3.132-33)

In producing a history of the rise and fall of the power of ecclesiastical institutions, Spencer gives another foundational account of how and why one type of religion declines in the context of a particular kind of modernity, a narrative that a good sociologist like Steve Bruce can distill into a single sentence: "individualism, egalitarianism, liberal democracy, and

science and technology, all contribute to a general sense of self-importance, of freedom from fate, which makes the traditional authoritarian dogmatic religion, with its vengeful God, generally unpalatable to modern sensibilities.” Bruce further adds: “This does not stop modern people being religious, but it does suggest by logical inference what we find by observation: both in the world of the mainstream churches and in the cultic milieu of alternative spirituality people are now generally unwilling to subordinate themselves to external authority” (45).

Both today and in the nineteenth century, theorists of modernization could be careful to admit that it does not preclude religious belief, but the versions of religion left in secularization’s wake are non-authoritarian. This development has been described as a happy extension of liberty sponsored by reformed Christianity. But it has also been described as the proliferation of modern pseudo-religions that are historically non-durable. For Lecky, a life-long latitudinarian member of the Church of Ireland, secularization is an almost entirely unalloyed instance of social progress allied with the spread of “true Christianity.” For Spencer, who frankly denied any supernatural origin for all religions including Christianity, “the transition from dogmatic theism to agnosticism” that takes place in highly evolved societies was to be embraced with no regrets at all (3.157). Bruce, the contemporary sociologist, claims to be neutral about secularization (whether it is a Good or Bad Thing), but it is clear that he believes that the religious freedom, or voluntary system, endorsed by Victorian liberals such as Lecky and Spencer (and many others with very different religious convictions) is a prologue to a story of religious decline:

By making religious affiliation a matter of personal preference, the rise of the voluntary association model undermines the taken-for-grantedness of religion, weakens its social presence, reduces the extent to which the state can promote a particular religion, separates religious rectitude from other vital forms of social being (such as extended kinship networks, citizenship, and national loyalty), and exposes the human origins of religion. (76-77)

On the other hand, a study of the reception of Lecky's work can produce evidence that many Victorian readers were prepared to accept the compatibility of religious pluralism in the context of a culturally dominant Protestantism and Christianity's on-going vitality. The *Pall Mall Gazette* welcomed his history of the "decay of dogmatic ideas" while stating the opinion that the work was "not, strictly speaking, a history of the rise of rationalism, but rather a history of the modernisation of religious opinion." And in 1877 Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Dean of Westminster, the day's greatest liberal churchman and a prolific and popular author in his own right, would argue "that what Mr. Lecky calls the secularisation of politics is in fact the Christianisation of theology." The changes documented and applauded by Lecky were crucial elements of "Christianity in its larger and wider aspect" (10). But the *Edinburgh Review*'s blunter reassurance – "it is in no sense an irreligious or an anti-religious book" (427) – recalls the apparent need to forestall another predictable line of reception for Lecky's work. For these readers, easily anticipated by the *Edinburgh Review*, an acquiescence to or celebration of religious pluralism equals a rejection of any durable religious heritage. Liberal, non-dogmatic theology can validate a broad range of religious beliefs and practices; but that validation is an initial step in a process that eventually reveals (or encourages people to believe in) the human origins of religion in general.

Perhaps the most famous Victorian critic of liberal theology was John Henry Newman. Buried, at his request, in the grave of his dear friend Ambrose St. John in 1890, Newman's stranger bedfellows today include contemporary sociologists of religion who endorse the idea that the Protestant Reformation began a series of social changes that would culminate in Christianity's decline in the West. As a young Anglican cleric Newman became convinced in the early 1830s that a fashionable apathy toward the dogmatic foundations of religious faith, excessive appeals to the Protestant principle of the right to private judgment, and efforts to reconcile scriptural and church history with contemporary (and thus transient) standards of reason were undermining the Church of Eng-

land's authority. By the early forties Newman was arguing that these tendencies of the day, if not actively opposed by the clergy and right-minded church members, would eventually undermine adherence to Christianity itself. In his review of Henry Hart Milman's *History of Christianity* (3 vols., 1840), a work in which the author frequently attributed supernatural elements in scriptural and ecclesiastical history to the credulity of former times, Newman described the following results of such "speculations":

Christianity will melt away in our hands like snow; we shall be unbelievers before we at all suspect where we are. With a sigh we shall suddenly detect the real state of the case. We shall look on Christianity, not as a religion, but as a past event which exerted a great influence on the course of the world, when it happened, and gave a tone and direction to religion, government, philosophy, literature, manners; an idea which developed itself in various directions strongly, which was indeed from the first materialized into a system or a church, and is still upheld as such by numbers, but by error; a great boon to the world, bestowed by the Giver of all good, as the discovery of printing may be, or the steam engine.... (2.242)

Roughly thirty-eight years after writing these words and after having been made a Cardinal, Newman would reframe these concerns (as he did countless times in his private and public writings) to again equate the modern anti-dogmatic Christianity celebrated by Lecky and Stanley with a denial of any true religion:

Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another.... It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as *true*. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to

make it say just what strikes his fancy. (qtd. in F. Turner, 63)

Newman is familiar to readers of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* thanks to his authorship of *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865), a book that was almost an exact contemporary of Lecky's volumes on rationalism and published by the same firm of Longmans. Written after a period of some twenty years of relative obscurity following his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1845, the *Apologia* was immediately recognized by many as a literary triumph, and Frank Turner has suggested that its success with Protestant readers depended in part on Newman's adoption of "the culturally familiar format of a spiritual autobiography" that featured a profoundly individualistic search for religious certitude (106). The book "presented a Protestant mind actively seeking to make its way in the world of the spirit and finally defining a new Roman Catholic religious affiliation via a process thoroughly understandable in Protestant terms" (109). Even so, the *Apologia* is a self-portrait by a man who came to believe, somewhat to his own surprise, that the Protestant Reformation had been the decisive chapter in the making of Britain's modern religious crisis.

Thinking of Lecky and Newman side by side today can remind us that the reading public of the 1860s was able to make best sellers of two works that dealt, in different ways, with versions of the secularization thesis. These books had diametrically opposed judgments about the value of the process, but not its primary cause. In the 1880s we can see Spencer place the secularization thesis in the context of his life's project to explain the laws that structure human societies, and he too is convinced that the growing religious pluralism of his day was "the logical outcome of the Protestant theory" (3.139).⁶ What is striking to me about these examples of what I am calling Victorian secularization theory is that they are so obviously and inextricably motivated by religious convictions. Secularization theory here is not simply *about* religion's modern fate. It is a particular species of theological discourse.

Twentieth-century secularization theory, by contrast, primarily became institutionalized in the academic field of sociology in its quest for

the terms, concepts, and methods that would enable the scientific study of society. Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967) and Bryan R. Wilson's *Religion in Secular Society: a Sociological Comment* (1966) are frequently cited as examples of modern secularization theory's distinctive legibility in the 1960s. And Berger's book closes with the representative claim that "the argument of this book stands or falls as an enterprise of sociological theorizing and, as such, is not amenable to either theological support or theological critique" (179). This is not to say that twentieth-century secularization theorists abandoned commentary on the Reformation, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism, but that commentary was routinely derived from *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* (1905) by fellow sociologist Max Weber.

First translated into English by Talcott Parsons, a young American with a Ph.D from Heidelberg, and published in 1930 with an introduction by the English economic historian R.H. Tawney, that seminal edition for the English speaking world suggests two very different genealogies for modern secularization theory. The translation itself presented Weber's often difficult prose with its extensive attention to terminology and method and discursive endnotes that threaten to overwhelm the primary text. Weber's method and style, in other words, made him a suitable foundational figure for a discipline eager to contrast its scientific footings with more literary or subjective approaches to social history. Tawney, on the other hand, carried on what could be considered a Victorian tradition in which highly readable, witty, and frequently ethically impassioned prose was the vehicle for deeply informed historical argument. Best known in the 1930s as the author of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), Tawney was enlisted by the translation's British publisher to help secure the otherwise obscure book some publicity (Scaff 219). Sympathetic to Weber's argument, he had in similar ways used *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* to trace modern capitalism's cult of "material riches" (286) to the religion of the Reformation and Puritan theology. A devout churchman and Labour party activist in addition to being a teacher, scholar, and editor, Tawney's

history of modern capitalism was unmistakably and literally enmeshed in Anglican traditions and controversies. The book originated as the inaugural Henry Scott Holland Memorial Lectures, their general subject being "the religion of the Incarnation in its bearing on the social and economic life of man." Dedicated to Charles Gore, a prominent Anglican theologian who had served as Bishop of Oxford from 1911-19, the published lectures had a Prefatory Note by the same that praised the results as superior to anything else that had been produced in "the modern battle between zealous mediaevalists impugning the Reformation as deeply responsible for the sins of modern industrialism, and no less zealous Protestants rebutting the charge and throwing it back" (xi).⁷

Weber in the 1930s was brought into the Anglo-American discussion of religion and modernity by translation. He was, for various reasons, able to pass, ten years after his death, for an external, impartial observer of British and American religious traditions in the course of his larger commentary on the social consequences of various theological positions. Tawney was born and bred to a tradition of theological activism and debate that was directly and obviously descended from the Tractarian controversies of the 1830s and their various reiterations throughout Victorian church politics and the broader literary culture that included Newman's *Apologia* and Lecky's *Rationalism. Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* had a relatively large, non-academic readership on both sides of the English-speaking Atlantic in the 1940s and beyond (judging by its frequent reprinting in paperback by Penguin in the UK and by the New American Library in the US). But Weber's work became in the 1950s and '60s the key text for the sociological investigation of the individualism, materialism, and disenchantment said to characterize modern capitalist societies. Little wonder that various academic children of the sixties – the 1960s – would trace their investigations to Weberian disenchantment.⁸ And yet, today, the 1860s strike me as the more familiar cultural terrain, a place where a wide range of arguments about modern change are being made in a world charged by a variety of religious faiths and their detractors. Though I am technically a child of the 1960s

(born in 1967), the world I see before me does not show many signs of being productively engaged by setting theology aside. Perhaps we now find ourselves children of the 1860s.

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Notes

¹ Bruce, for instance, writes that “in the British case, Christianity has experienced at least 150 years of decline” (54).

² My work was by no means greeted with uniform approbation. The statement about a lack of “resistance” only refers to my criticism of the secularization paradigm’s overly robust ability to structure nineteenth-century literary studies. This assessment is based on the following reviews, by scholars from several different disciplines, listed in the order of their appearance: *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 September 2007, 28 (Hillary Jackson); *Victorian Poetry* 45:3 (2007), 266-67 (Andrew M. Stauffer); *SEL*, “Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century,” 47:4 (2007), 945, 951 (Margaret Russett); *Victorian Studies* 50:2 (2008), 350-51 (Kate Flint); *Journal of British Studies* 47 (2008), 443-45 (David Latane); *Church History* 77:2 (2008), 489-91 (W. Clark Gilpin); *Victorian Review* 34:1 (2008), 187-89 (Emma Mason); *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 35:2 (2008), 237-40 (Donald Hall); *SEL* “Recent Studies in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century” 48:3 (2008), 694, 703 (Adam Potkay); *Victorians Institute Journal* 36 (2008), 335-39 (Ruth Windscheffel); *Studies in the Novel* 41:1 (2009), 126-30 (Lisa Jadwin); *Religion and Literature* 41:1 (2009), 181-83 (Sara Maurer); *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32:2 (2009), 272-74 (Terry Wright); *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 36:3 (2009), 368-72 (Galen K. Johnson); *Religion and the Arts* 14:1/2 (2010), 185-87 (Andrew Armond); *Christianity and Literature* 59:3 (2010), 552-56 (Joshua King); *Wordsworth Circle* 41:4 (2010), 227-29 (Jeffrey Barbeau).

³ In a less admiring review, Pecora spots an “Anglocentric parochialism” in Levine’s subject and method that encourages the impression that an anxious need to reconcile science and morals is “peculiarly Victorian” (686).

⁴ For samplings of this range of work, see the collections edited by (1) Beckford and Demerath and (2) B. Turner.

⁵ "It is impossible to lay down a railway," Lecky writes in the general introduction, "without creating an intellectual influence. It is probable that Watt and Stephenson will eventually modify the opinions of mankind as profoundly as Luther or Voltaire" (1.8).

⁶ Wheeler-Barclay observes that Spencer "retained many of the cultural traits and mental habits of the Dissenting circles in which he had been raised. He disliked the restraint imposed by ceremony and distrusted any form of organization that went beyond the individual voluntary association" (35).

⁷ Gore's Prefatory Note was suppressed in all American editions.

⁸ I don't have the space to detail sociology's related disavowal of the Spencerian legacy on secularization. For a sense of the vehemence of that disavowal, see the opening paragraph of Parsons's first book and its declaration, "Spencer is dead," meaning no longer read and of no consequence to sociology (1).

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