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Just So

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Public Theology

Ideas and insights from
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&
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Just So

stories and critical comment
on social justice themes

Public Theology

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Ideas for a Public Theology

It is often easier to tackle difficult subjects by telling a story first, so I begin my brief thoughts on Public Theology by an equally brief account of how the William Temple Foundation (www.wtf.org.uk) became involved in discussion of the global financial crisis. As the events unfolded during the autumn of 2008 it became clear that the nature and scale of this could be beyond anything that most of us have experienced. As a non-economist (although I did take Economics A-level many years ago!), I felt I needed some help in understanding what was happening and in following the course of events. Access to the internet and an insatiable curiosity led me rapidly to the BBC website and the blog of Robert Peston their Business Editor. Peston's own article on "The New Capitalism"¹ set me thinking about what type of different future might be possible and I suggested to my colleagues at WTF

that there was a clear case for faith-based responses to this. From this developed a series of papers, a meeting in Manchester, and the setting up of the "Religious Futures Network" (www.wtf.org.uk/ReligionandCapitalismNetwork.php) which now welcomes contributions from interested parties. During the course of this a further discussion began with former colleagues in the Diocese of Worcester about the nature of Public Theology and the fear that this was in danger of being too technical or academic and thus excluding "ordinary" churchgoers from debates that directly affect their lives and to which they might want to respond.

I agree that this is itself a crucial issue, hence my contribution to this booklet. My starting point is a publication by the American theologian, David Tracy ("The Analogical Imagination" SCM Press, 1981), who argues that theology

can have at least three different “publics” or audiences. Those are the church itself, the academy, and then the wider world. So what you say and how you say it depends on who you are trying to address. This is not easy, and for those of us who find ourselves attempting to cross boundaries and to talk to all three audiences, the challenge is particularly daunting and it is easy to get things wrong! I want regular churchgoers in my congregations to get stuck into the question of the pastoral impact of the current crisis and to think about the religious values that could now be introduced into the political debates. Offering and listening to the accounts of how individuals and communities are being directly affected by the economic downturn and then finding ways of supporting people are important and legitimate responses. But I believe there has to be more to it than just this.

I think we need to be able to understand and analyse what is happening in order to develop critical responses and to suggest alternatives. This is not simply about individuals but also involves organisations and political and economic systems. My own journey of discovery took me beyond Peston and into the work of economists such as Hyman Minsky who was writing about economic cycles and earlier downturns back in the 1980s and then an Australian economist called Steve Keen who wrote a book called "Debunking Economics" which questions the way economics itself is understood and taught. Keen kindly responded to me by email and sent through some helpful material, just as Robert Peston has also responded directly to our work at WTF. What this has added to the process is the realisation that we ignore the past at our peril. In some ways "we have been here before" and to recognise this

offers both a sense of perspective but also a warning that humans need to acknowledge their own failings, lack of control of events, and general limitations – good theological lessons one might argue! So for me, engaging the academic has illuminated possible faith-based responses to the situation as well as enabling discussion with some of the serious thinkers in the field.

Then we need to go even further and decide how religious values and insights might contribute to shaping appropriate policies and aspirations for the future. So narrative turns into analysis and then into what is called “praxis”, or “what are we going to do about all this then?” My colleague at WTF, John Atherton, has put more detail on this than I have been able to do and his papers on the website are testimony to this. My simplistic approach is to argue that action is needed at a number of different levels. The very local, or micro level – and this

is where the more idealistic responses of environmental movements such as the Transition Initiatives may have something to teach us; the macro level of government and business policy, for instance over regulation of the banks and the financial services industry generally; the global level which must take into account the growing power of China let alone the implications for social unrest that will follow from more people losing out as capitalism fails to deliver “the goods”; and then what one might call the “cosmic” or theological level as we attempt to discern what it means for the Kingdom of God to operate in the here and now, or what visions of what humans can be or become should be at work in our evaluation of current political systems.

What do we learn about ourselves from what is happening? I fear for what I see we turn ourselves into through the unfettered global capitalism that has been in charge in recent years and

which has now brought us to the current state of affairs. As a parish priest but also as an Industrial Chaplain and Rural Officer, I perceive that people have become increasingly mercenary, aggressive, motivated by profit and disrespectful of others and their needs. This needs to be countered by Christian ideas of how we are to be concerned for each other and to express our responsibility for the whole of creation. But there also has to be a note of political and economic realism which will gain us a "seat at the table" with those in power and allow our insights to get a hearing at that level. Our thinking and our Public Theology has to be hard-edged and rigorous as well as soft-centred and pastoral! We each have different contributions to make and varied resources to offer, only when we respect these differences will we offer a credible and effective Public Theology.

Further Developments!

There are a number of serious challenges involved in pursuing this approach. One is that in the example of the Global Financial Crisis and indeed any contemporary issue that demands our attention, things keep changing on an almost daily basis. Keeping up with developments, let alone managing to find the time and resources to make sensible comments on them is a real problem. I will come back to that in a moment, but it does mean that Public Theology runs the risk of being out of date very quickly. The other question is that of who actually undertakes these tasks and the extent to which they are then representative of a wider church or theological constituency.

At the same time as writing this paper for "Just So" I was also working on a short presentation on the same themes for the annual conference of the British

and Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT) which this year focussed precisely on Public Theology. The main speakers included Bishop Stephen Lowe, recently retired as the Bishops' representative on Urban Life and Issues, Elaine Graham who worked with him on the Faithful Cities report of 2007, plus two colleagues heavily involved in Christian social action in the Diocese of Newcastle and two further speakers working together in Bradford. It was all impressive material but the question which came up repeatedly was that of the need to develop a new language, or discourse, to describe how faith groups engage with social and economic affairs. The question that was thrown at me by those who came to my presentation was "but who is this 'we' you are talking about who are engaged in this public theology?" The implication is that this has become such a specialist task and so demanding in terms of time and expertise, that only a

very few are going to be able to get involved. What can the rest of “us” contribute to this level of activity and debate?

My inclination is to say that there is a need for certain specialist research which is carried out on behalf of the wider church and is then made available to it. Whether or not the wider church then listens and takes note of course is another matter. So organisations like the William Temple Foundation do have some resources which can generate material to feed into the public church debate as well as trying to influence the academic and public policy worlds. Follow this on the websites and get involved if and when it seems appropriate. Likewise the book recently published by Stephen Lowe and Elaine Graham on “What makes a Good City” (SCM Press 2009) is another source of helpful material. But most people need something quick

and easy to get hold of and absorb and which keeps the debate rolling, hence the value of the type of blog produced by Robert Peston for the BBC. Perhaps it is this that a Public Theology should put its efforts into?

The actual debate about how to respond to the current crisis appears to be moving on even since I began to write this paper. What is happening as I write is a growing interest in the study and methods of economics itself, especially what is known as macroeconomics which deals with the structural side of things, the role of businesses, institutions and governments rather than the individual level. There is a distinct “theological” dimension to this in that it concerns what understandings of human nature underpin the theories of economists and the decisions of policy makers. We call this an “anthropology”, meaning simply a theory of what it means to be

human. This is an area where Christian beliefs ought to have something to say and in which it may offer critiques of what is around in the wider society.

What is happening within the subject of economics itself is just such a debate about what understanding of human nature is at stake in what has become the current orthodoxy, which itself shapes and influences real life through policy decisions. The operation of markets, what is called the “Efficient Markets Hypothesis” and the assumption that humans are rational decision-makers who follow the signals and information that is readily available through the market system in order to guide their decisions, is now coming under serious question both from inside and outside the discipline. It is perhaps too early to begin to lay out the parameters of this developing debate or to suggest ways in which the Christian tradition might have its own

contribution to make, but this is a task that needs to be undertaken. What is known as “Behavioural Economics” itself related to a branch of studies called “Behavioural Finance” is gaining interest as can be seen from recent blogs by both Robert Peston (July 28th) and the BBC Economic editor Stephanie Flanders (July 21st). This has set me on the path of trying to discover more about this and to understand what is involved and there is another paper on the WTF Religious Futures Network website pointing in this direction as a result.

To the extent that I grasp this, it is an attempt to use insights from psychology to describe more adequately ways in which humans make decisions when it comes to matters financial and economic. It could provide a better description of how stock markets work, for instance, let alone how bankers and financial institutions appear to get

carried away and take risks (with other people's money) that then lead into the sort of crisis we are now experiencing. There are some experts and academics who appear to have used such insights to predict the coming crisis and so when it is said that "nobody saw this was coming", this is actually incorrect as some clearly did! A more adequate understanding of how humans work in practice – rather than in the theories of neo-classical economics – might just have led to a different outcome IF they had been taken note of earlier in the process.

Now that is obviously debatable. The central issue seems to be that of how much control we are capable of exercising over ourselves, and therefore that of how much control we have over external events. Could "they" – the bankers and politicians – have done better IF they had acknowledged the limits of their knowledge and control

and operated with a theory of “bounded rationality” rather than the apparent more fully informed rationality which is assumed by the markets hypothesis? This is where the issue of risk versus uncertainty really impinges upon the debate. Risk is something that the experts claim to be able to measure and predict, whereas uncertainty (about the future) is simply that – a realisation that the past is no real guide to what will happen in the future. The attempts to quantify and evaluate risk have led to the situation where levels of debt have undermined the whole banking system.

Now where the “system” goes from here is perhaps less obvious. Robert Peston’s blog on July 28th (as I write) is very interesting on this. If the operation of efficient (and supposedly) free markets is now losing credibility and those who have relied on this theory are going to come under serious

challenge from Behavioural Economists (and this is a very big IF of course), what is the alternative? It would seem to be the recourse to greater government intervention and regulation, but that itself is highly unlikely to gain much public support, let alone that of the financial institutions which seem to play the permanent game of finding ways round every new set of rules and regulations. We (ordinary folks in this case) are not about to trust the financial institutions to regulate themselves, but are we any more likely to trust the politicians to do so? Certainly not in the current climate. So who is to be trusted? There the thinking gets a little hazy and the contribution of Behavioural Economists does not really suggest a way forward, even though it may have come up with a better analysis of how things have gone wrong.

It would be neat and cosy to step in at

this point and claim that some form of Public Theology was going to come up with the answers. But this is a temptation to be resisted. What “we” – collectively and in a well-informed and properly argued, partly rational manner – must do is to examine our own understandings of what it is to be (and to become more fully) human, our “anthropology” if you like, but to do so in discussion with others who are pursuing similar questions. I made my own attempt on this when I suggested that we might talk about the pre-autonomous, autonomous and then post-autonomous levels (Blurred Encounters, 2005). So perhaps psychology and/or psychoanalysis have a contribution here, but I suspect other disciplines and theories can also add something to the debate. Some environmentalists, for instance, have clear views on human nature as being more closely related to the rest of life. Public Theology needs to enter this

debate with some humility and a willingness to listen and learn as well as to speak. No clear solutions then, but rather the will to cross boundaries and to engage with others who are asking similar questions – that is one recipe for a developing Public Theology.

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Consumers or Citizens? A Christian Insight on our Economy

Like John Reader, I would like to begin with a story – or rather two recollections.

Many years ago when I was a curate I preached one Sunday about apartheid and was roundly taken to task afterwards by certain members of the congregation. Discussing the experience later with my vicar we concluded that if we were to claim any right to say anything about these sort of issues we had to add something extra, otherwise we were no different to any member of the ‘chattering classes’. That something had to be theological insight.

A few years earlier, I recall hearing the then Agriculture Minister John Selwyn Gummer (at that time still a member of the Church of England), condemn from a pulpit the report ‘Faith in the City’ – as

did other members of the government of the day – for interfering in issues the Church had no right to get involved in. It didn't have the knowledge or expertise to intrude in the nitty-gritty of such policy matters. Others may better recall the details of the debate that followed, but I concluded that the Church very much *does* have the right to get involved in such debate but that we have to be sure of the ground we stand on. Detailed policy prescription may be the place of politicians but the church should have something to say about principles from its theological insight and the knowledge and expertise built up from its engagement with communities up and down the country as well as the broader issues that arise from that.

So we may share a distaste of the excessive rewards of some bankers and may be angry about the way in which their failings contributed to the current

recession but what can we as Christians add? Our concern should have deeper roots than simply unease about the failure of one sector of the economy, important as it is – and we might want to ask how it became so important, and whether it should retain that importance. So our reflection should be informed by an understanding of economics and perhaps of other social sciences as well as pastoral insight and experience, but deeper than that a theological understanding that is rooted in careful study, prayer and reflection.

Christians will not be the only ones asking questions of our present economic and social model and we should use the wisdom of others to help our analysis and responses and may well wish to form alliances where appropriate. We should also be aware of the pressure to return to 'business as usual' as evidenced by the saying

already abroad in the City that 'bonuses are back'.

There are many analyses of what has happened to the western economy over the past two years. Some such as Peston's 'The New Capitalism'¹ referred to by John Reader set out in some detail the reasons why the 'credit crunch' came about as well as suggesting that a new and more enlightened capitalism might be necessary for its survival. His 'Who Rules Britain?'² describes particularly how private finance of one form and another has increasingly influenced the shape of our society through the power it has accreted to itself. It may well be that the deregulation of the 1980s was instrumental in this happening along with monetarist economic theory replacing the Keynesian consensus that was put in place after World War II following the depression of the 1930s.

There were, however, other forces at work beyond those of political or economic philosophy. So, Robert Reich in 'Supercapitalism'³ says that the change from what he calls 'the nearly golden age' of the 1950s and 60s was attributable to the raft of new transportation and communications technologies mostly associated with fighting the Cold War. These were the beginnings of globalization that drastically lowered the cost of moving things from one point to another. Other technological advances vastly reduced the cost of many products as well as it being possible to move production to parts of the world with lower labour costs. Thus it became possible for anyone with access to the more freely available funds to set up business where costs were cheapest and for consumers with more information to have greater choice, thus threatening the old, slow moving

corporations with their generous benefits and jobs for life.

In the UK as in the US this has led to a huge reduction in manufacturing (at the end of WWII manufacturing accounted for about 40 per cent of the UK economy, falling to 26 per cent at the end of the 1970s and 13 per cent in 2008, compared with 77 per cent now for the service sector). This has also led as I have argued⁴ to a change of perception and sense of value from being producers to consumers. Thus the boom of the past so-called 'nice' decade (no inflation, continuous expansion) occurred because production had been off-shored to China and other low-cost countries in the Far East. Inflation was kept low and allowed low interest rates, and along with a loose monetary policy after shocks like 9/11, meant that credit grew to fuel further consumption. This was also driven by substantial trade

surpluses built up by producer countries like China, much of which were not invested in infrastructure or fuelling domestic demand in their own countries but in US bond stocks.

Because of the large amount of money in the economic system and ever more ingenious ways of repackaging credit and supposedly diluting risk, more and more people were able to gain credit to enjoy goods and to purchase homes than would have previously been able to. The problems arose because risk was not properly assessed in many cases and because in many of the clever financial schemes the multiples of credit advanced became so great that gains could be spectacular but losses were magnified many times over when things went wrong. The bubble eventually burst because mortgagees (particularly on US sub-prime mortgages) found they could no longer afford the repayments as interest rates

began to rise and because the increasing rate of economic activity across the world and rising levels of prosperity in the developing economies led to rising raw material prices with inflationary consequences. The oil price spike in the summer of 2008 was only one visible sign of this. Basic commodity prices for raw materials like metals were also at an all-time high. The better off in China and other growing economies have been changing their diet to include among other foods more meat, which requires higher levels of inputs such as cereals to produce than a more vegetable based diet. There was significant food price inflation for staples like wheat, and shortages for people in poorer countries⁵. If we are to avoid a world food shortage it will be necessary to produce food more efficiently, which will include restricting meat production including limits for us in the West.

This necessarily sweeping resume of the economic changes of recent decades should not imply that we are caught up in some inevitable process and are powerless to change future outcomes. Indeed it is important to recognise the ways in which thinking is influenced by the forces at work and how we might bend those forces to a better outcome. So in this year's (2009) first Reith Lecture, Michael Sandel argues that we are at the end of an era of 'market triumphalism' and that we need to think through the moral limits of markets – without quite realising it, without ever deciding to do so, we have drifted from having a market economy to being a market society. This sense of marketization has permeated many aspects of our society and has reached into many of the ways in which we organise not just our public services but how we view each other.

Interestingly, Sandel in his fourth Reith Lecture talks about common good, which has been important in Catholic social teaching for some years, when he says, 'Unlike market-driven politics, a politics of the common good invites us to think of ourselves less as consumers, and more as citizens.' In this he is arguing for a greater sense of mutuality and democratic debate in the shaping of our lives, which will be about changing attitudes and dispositions, what Tocqueville called 'habits of the heart'. This, Sandel claims, is a moral and spiritual project.

Stephen Green⁶, who is the Chairman of HSBC and also an Anglican non-stipendiary minister, is more inclined to accept the power of globalization and the market, seeing them as positive instruments for effecting good. Human beings have always been traders⁷ and the market is an instrument of this. The market is the least worst engine of

social and economic development, but he does accept that there will be times when governments will need to intervene to correct its worst excesses and failures. None the less, he says, creating [economic] value should depend on values and ethics; on 'integrity based on honesty, trust and a real desire to exchange value for value'. This should come from connecting our metaphysical and moral framework - what we worship, what we admire, what we hold dear, what we hold to be right - with what we think about the world and what we do and should do. For him the 'interpretive prism' is Christianity, which says something about our value as human beings and the possibilities of our personal and collective transformation. This he allies with our connectedness as human beings through the possibilities that are largely the result of the forces of commercialization, urbanization and

individualization, which are such powerful transforming elements of globalization.

These two viewpoints (of Sandel and Green) suggest differing degrees of response to the current economic crisis. Both Green and Cable (perhaps wearing more his politician's hat than as earlier that of a former chief economist for Shell) agree that beyond short-term fixes there needs to be a more fundamental reappraisal of our economic and financial system further down the line. Quite what that might be is and will be the subject of vigorous debate depending on philosophical, economic and political viewpoint, but maybe this is the place for the Church to suggest some principles based on its theological insight.

The recent papal encyclical 'Caritas in Veritate'⁸ – On integral human development in charity and truth – says

that the current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future. The underlying value must be the centrality of 'man' created by God and it reminds everyone, especially governments engaged in boosting the world's economic and social assets, that the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity, for Man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life. It goes on to say that the trust that has ceased to exist in the market is a grave loss. This was the reason the financial markets seized up causing the credit crunch, because banks could no longer have confidence in the value of the assets and ability to repay of other

financial institutions they were lending to. More fundamentally, however, 'without truth, without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation, especially in a globalized society at difficult times like the present.'

The nature of trust matters not just for the functioning of the financial markets but because as a society we have been drawn into the narrow marketized way of living our lives. The recession, which has seen many people lose jobs, businesses and homes, as well as those of us who have been more secure reassess our spending, has called into question the psychological contract we thought we had with our economic system. If there are fractures opening up within our society (and these may increase as unemployment and

financial insecurity increase) and our sense of well-being is bruised, we need to find ways of healing these wounds. Reconciliation and a rebuilding of trust will be necessary⁹. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission did this in the far more broken situation of post-apartheid South Africa. That may be a step too far for the UK but reconciliation and the opportunity to accept responsibility would be far more helpful than the blame and adversarial make up of so much of our public life. Instead of individualism and the potential for conflict we should acknowledge our connectedness. Love of neighbour (or even enemy) requires a sense of common good and mutuality and relationship.

This is not to do away with entrepreneurship and risk but to foster the realisation that they should be harnessed for the good of all, not just for personal gain. Of course, in a

capitalist system the drive of individuals and the reward of that will be part of the system but the excesses we have seen must not in the future distort our common life. Reward is not gained only in financial terms and there should be a greater recognition of other ways in which a person's contribution is made. The Christian sense of the uniqueness and value of every person suggests that we should be placing value in a different place to financial wealth in the ordering of our lives together so that all may participate for who they are and what they can contribute in the broadest sense rather than what they own¹⁰. This is not to limit possibilities but to transform them in that we are called to life in all its fullness and abundance – abundance in relationship as well as, or maybe more than, in the material. We also need to face up to scarcity in the sense of a world of finite resources and the distribution of those resources. More for

us implies (to some extent at least) less for others. And whilst some put their trust in technological advances to help in the future we cannot avoid the fact that we are grossly overusing the earth's natural resources, which also says something about the necessity to regain a sense of balance and interdependence with nature as well as our fellow men and women.

All this is in the fairly narrow realm of economic relationships and the current financial stringencies may focus attention in this area. But those who have researched happiness or well-being would say this is too limited. We are more than economic beings or relationships and we require far more than this to truly flourish as people and as a society. Atherton in the tradition of William Temple has proposed a set of seven 'middle axioms' or principles¹¹, which include the priority of the nurture and care of children, lifelong

education in its broadest not purely functional sense, personal and communal wholeness, the necessity of income and work but with equity, stewardship of the created order, ethical finance, and more egalitarian societies.

The immediate crisis of 2008 has eased but its effects will continue to ripple through the 'real economy' causing real pain to ordinary people. Although there is some discussion about how to regulate the banks the wider issues have still to be properly debated and we are a long way from shaping any new kind of future. People of faith and the Churches should seize the initiative, having been on the back foot in the atmosphere of the past decade, to shape that future. From our gospel insights we can influence the kinds of values and deeper understandings about our nature as people and as a society that will affect the ways in

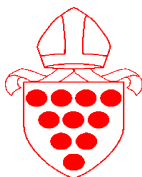
which we can better live our lives – for the good of all of us and for that of the world we inhabit.

Phillip Jones, Team Leader of Faith at Work in Worcestershire

1. Robert Peston, *The New Capitalism* can be found on his blog at bbc.co.uk
2. Robert Peston, *Who Rules Britain? ... and who's to blame for the economic mess we're in* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 2008)
3. Robert Reich, *Supercapitalism* (Icon Books: London, 2009)
4. 'Weightless Identity in Post-Material Communities' in John Reader and Christopher R Baker, Eds, *Entering the New Theological Space: Blurred Encounters of Faith, Politics and Community* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2009)
5. For a wider discussion of both the 'credit crunch' but also commodity issues see, among others, Vince Cable, *The Storm* (Atlantic Books: London, 2009) and also Rowan Williams, *Ethics, Economics and Global Justice*, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2323 and Goudzwaard, *Underlying causes of the global economic crisis*, www.ctbi.org.uk/pdf_view.php?id=308
6. Stephen Green, *Good Value: Reflections on money, morality and an uncertain world* (Allen Lane: London, 2009)
7. Interestingly, John Milbank in a paper given at a recent conference says this view, based on Adam Smith is exploded by Karl Polanyi, 'For most of human history human beings have been so radically and

immediately dependent upon each other that the first thing they have looked for is social recognition as the pre-condition of both status and security. For this reason they have usually been content with economic arrangements of reciprocal balance...'

8. www.zenit.org/english
9. This is based on my Audenshaw Paper (AP227) which draws on the work of a number of colleagues from the West Midlands Industrial Mission Association that is available in a privately circulated paper
10. Both Green and Goudzwaard, identify the story of Dr. Faustus and the danger of selling our souls
11. www.wtf.org.uk/ReligionandCapitalismNetwork.php
The New Economics Foundation has also proposed five ways to well-being, which are very similar. See www.neweconomics.org/gen/well-beingfiveways.aspx



Just So is meant to be read and studied by a wide range of people, both within the faith communities and in wider society. It is being circulated to churches and other faith groups, voluntary and community agencies, statutory organisations and local authority departments.

If you have any comments about the contents or want further copies, please contact John Paxton, Worcester Diocesan Social Responsibility Officer, at The Old Palace, Deansway, Worcester, WR1 2JE or by email jpaxton@cofe-worcester.org.uk.

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