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## BEYOND WEBERIAN RATIONALIZATION

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**Abstract:** Currently we live a collapse of the totalitarian looks and widespread neo-liberalism. It seems appropriate to discuss the social role of religion in the critical-social perspective of modernity and especially the humanism of the future. Therefore, I shall refer only to a basic aspect of the religious thought of Max Weber, taking as a point of contrast framing and critical view of Mesoamerican tradition. Max Weber argued that all religions were part of a world-historical process whose evolution is explained by the momentum of an internal logic traced by the irrepressible desire to rationalize ideas and life, especially in the case of salvation religions. Process that he considered as inevitable and whose outcome is modern religious rationality. This line of thinking with universalist claims leads us to question the validity of deterministic proposals that should already be limited to the western world and to European concerns - given their reductionism not only in the face of religious visions such as the one that Kierkegaard had about Christianity. In addition, it leaves out polytheistic conceptions and combinations derived from syncretism, such as the traditional conceptions of the peoples who were colonized (where monotheistic religions are nominal, because they did not follow the steps of the Weberian protocol), or that belong to Millennial civilizational horizons such as China, India or Mesoamerica, whose evolution does not necessarily lead to the rationality to which that German thinker refers.

**Key words:** religion, rationalization, determinism, Eurocentrism, nominal monotheism.

## 1. Introduction

The West's philosophical and humanistic debates in recent years have little to offer. They come across as rather repetitive and monotonous, as if grasping at the same handholds that have taken us on rhetorical routes to solutions that we have already heard before. As Octavio Paz (2007) put it, the *powerful* gaze only at their own portrait. Which explains the centuries and centuries the West has spent teasing out the work of the same thinkers and engaging in a monologue about its own agenda, traditions, beliefs and crossroads toward the future. This epistemic nearsightedness has left humanism stuck in the mud, as it were, unable to gain traction, in spite of the capacity for self-criticism shown by a good number of thinkers, including the lucid voices of immigrants like the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2012; 2013; 2014); the fresh air of decolonial thinking found in the work of Latin Americans like Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015) and Walter D. Mignolo (2010); the ideas of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek (2016; 2020); the last flashes of innovative thinking from Miklavž Očep (1963–2005) and Goran Starčević (1966–2015); or the valuable contributions of our friend, the Slovenian poet and philosopher Primož Repar.

As the researcher of Indigenous experiences Isobel M. Findlay of the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, states in an interview with Daniel Coleman: „You know, we hear these discourses of certain kinds of knowledges having no relevance, and that includes humanity's knowledges at this point historically. But we also have counter discourses at this point, warning of the waste of knowledges but also re-posing the question of how knowledges survive that faced all sorts of prohibitions and exclusions—not only survive but remain key guardians of so much of our diversity in the world, the biodiversity inseparable from linguistic diversity.” (Findlay 2012, 146).

This analysis aims to offer a modest overview from which we will attempt first to critically question Max Weber's thinking that religions form part of a historical-universal process that follows an inner logic toward rationalization. Subsequently we will look at what Søren Kierkegaard would have thought of that proposal, and finally, we will present our own position considering our heritage as Mesoamericans.

## 2. Weber and the one path

Max Weber, the renowned German sociologist and philosopher, was born in Germany in 1864 and died in 1920. He was the heir of the positivism that reigned in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—a

philosophical school that, as we all know, asserted that all knowledge comes from experience, which can be confirmed by the scientific method. It was a period when even the idea of Universal History was subjected to the criticism that it limited itself to an orderly, linear representation of events from the past, that it took as an inner postulate the idea of moving from Ancient Times to the Middle Ages, and from there to the Modern Age. This was a structure or framework that held sway for a long time and that the German organicist historian Oswald Spengler would challenge in his work about the decline of the West (1918, Volumes I and II) for trying to downplay the facts as they related to the term itself (Universal History) and excluding from the historical record significant events from non-European regions, which of course deserve to be included.

It is within this frame of reference that we situate Max Weber's thinking, which we will attempt to characterize in general terms. We will begin by pointing to the immediate influences of Weber's methodology for the social sciences, which María José Fariñas Dulce rightly identifies as Dilthey's historicism and Rickert's neo-Kantianism (1989, 80-87). Both are present. There is also religion. As Prisciliano Cordero del Castillo remarks, "unlike in Marx's view, for Weber religion is the only force that enables people to redefine the sense of their life, thus taking on enormous potential for changing society radically" (2001, 249).

Religion thus becomes, for Weber, a legitimizing force of human existence. On the one hand there is a real, empirical world, grasped by the senses, and on the other, an invisible but equally real world that is grasped by religious ideals, and that is very important for understanding the visible world and keeping it in order. Weber also distinguishes himself from Durkheim and his concern with the individual's integration into society, by focusing his attention on discovering the factors that drive society forward. Weber tries to shed light on the origins of the modern Western world and the forces involved in its development. This is the central argument of his best-known work. «The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism» (Cordero 2001, 249).

In order to appreciate the influence Weber has had on the Sociology of Religion, we need to recall several other key topics of his extensive sociological opus, such as his historical research into the Protestant ethic and capitalism; his studies of charisma, the charismatic prophet, mysticism, asceticism, secularization and rationalization, among others. What interests us is this last topic: the process of rationalization (Weber 1973, 328-329); (Apud. Cordero 2001, 250).

In this regard, one of the keys for understanding Weber is the emphasis or weight he gives to the Europe-centered historical-universal perspective we mentioned earlier. As Friedrich Tenbruck observed: "...what today is called in shorthand the process of rationalization and refers to Western development, in which Weber had a special interest, was no more than a particular case of a more general class of events" (1999,

65). Thus, he states that the decisive discovery of this thinker was his insistence that rationalization “...was sustained by the impulse of an inner logic, consisting of religious ideas’ relentless drive toward rationalization” (quoted by Weisz 2011, 109).

Although Tenbruck’s assertion may seem to contain echoes of evolutionism with historical-universalist pretensions, Wolfgang Schluchter sees it otherwise: Weber is “*between* historical-universal comparison and an evolutionary theory linked to a logic of development” (1998, 56), i.e., between a process that occurs over and above unique rationalization processes and sociology seen as a history of the development of the West. This stance is remarkable in other contemporary researchers who overlook Spengler’s organicist historiographic critique. In Wolfgang Mommsen’s view, „The concept of universal history is what gives Weber’s work its consistency. While acknowledging that Weber had refused to propose a theory of universal history, Mommsen finds that his works contain a great number of proposals along these lines, which lay bare his intention not so much to analyze the historical development of the West as to set up systems of typical-ideal models that could serve as transcendent references in the light of which to analyze social processes of the past or present. For Mommsen, Weberian sociology can be approached a system of concepts, formal for the most part, based «on a certain theory of the philosophy of history», which, he added, implies an orientation «that Weber himself, to a certain extent, has disputed»” (Weisz 2011, 110).

Max Weber postulates the idea that all historical processes consist of a set of social changes involving economic, political and social factors that remain constant and that are gradually modified at the same rate. Guenther Roth argues that Weberian sociology of religion consists of “...maintaining the political, social and economic factors relatively constant in the historical-universal scale in order to be able to propose explanations of the differential impact of the ethical prescriptions of the universal religions” (1973, 77).

Max Weber assumes that the culmination of this universal process is rationalization, which encompasses not only beliefs and ideas, but also life. The key to understanding Weber’s logic is discerning the historical-universal character of its horizons, a perspective that led him, in the words of Benjamin Nelson, “to the study of the distinctive forms of rationalization produced in the West and the East” (1974, 271), using the comparative method. For this reason, Weisz observes: „The components of reality that Weber looks at in his study of universal religions are inextricably tied to the historical-universal process of rationalization. This is the key in which Weber analyzes the different indicators that show that the West has a rationalization that is distinct from that of other civilizations, and this is the variable that runs across his substantive studies of each of the civilizations” (2011, 108).

Unfortunately, according to Habermas, Weber did not consider rationalization processes as a phenomenon peculiar to the West (1999, 211); rather he generalized them in a single direction, applying them to all the universal religions. In Weber's words, "once systematic thinking about religious praxis, on the one hand, and on the other the rationalization of life (...) have reached a certain stage, which in each case can be very different, a 'pantheon is formed'..." (2001, 250).

As we can see, the rationalization of life thus appears as a universal, unambiguous phenomenon that contributes to the systematization of gods, an independent driving factor that develops and reaches a certain stage. This dogmatic consideration leads him to assume that the historical-universal process of rationalization only becomes consolidated in the West, and he offers three arguments to sustain his assertion: basically, that there are contradictions in the Middle East and Asia, that Judaism tends toward universality, while the popular religion of other peoples and regions has proven to be a burden (Weber 1983): „With the exception of Judaism and Protestantism, all the religions and religious ethical systems, without exception, had to revert to the worship of saints, heroes or functional gods, by popular demand. In China, for example, a stratum of bureaucrats scorned the magical religions of the masses, but used them all the same to maintain their domination and the social order" (Weisz 2011, 112).

So far it is evident that Weberian reasoning implies a universalist claim seeking to join forces with a meta-historical claim. Thus, it is important to move beyond this mistaken vision of historical evolution and apprehend the relative value of the process of rationalization, which is clear to see in almost all of his texts – especially those dealing with his sociology of religion (Weber 1983; Weisz 2011, 118). This conviction raises doubts about whether or not this process leads toward fanaticism; the stagnation of ideas; intolerance in cognitive, political, religious and intellectual terms; the sectorization of consciences, etc. Could it be that the purported improvement or consummation has actually impoverished the conception of the world and of life, made it more unyielding?

Max Weber states that the process of rationalization almost always culminates in the so-called salvation religions, i.e., those that, while monotheistic, are grounded in a dualism of irreducible polar opposites: good and evil (e.g., Judaism and the Christian religions, especially the Protestant variations). On this assumption, the belief is that evil will be vanquished at the end of the world, separated from the good forever. Thus, human beings have a morality that determines their fate in the afterlife, which mean that people's real existence is to be found beyond this world. On this point, Weisz highlights the following: „Salvation religions constitute for Weber a universal stage in rationalization, with immediate consequences in the systematization of practical life, in the

configuration of a life behavior. The exact shape it takes in each case depends on historical conditions. Among these, Weber will analyze the relations between the different kinds of religiosity and the social status/class of the group professing this religiosity in a given historical situation" (2011, 112).

### 3. Kierkegaard, reason and decision

This line of thought with universalist claims, such as the one we just examined, prompts us to note the limited validity of such deterministic claims. They are propositions that should be demarcated as Western, particularly European experiences, given their diminishment in the face of paradoxical religious visions such as Kierkegaard's with respect to Christianity (for him rationality was not enough). As Weisz observes: „Weber was part of a generation impacted by violent transformations that the German cultural world underwent in its late modernization. Both the artistic and academic production of his time show signs of this powerful epochal imprint (...) If the modern destiny seemed inevitable to him, it is precisely because it was inscribed in a historical Philosophy" (2011, 122).

According to Weisz, the idea that is equivalent to destiny in Weber's thinking is metaphysical and social, which "may have been a fundamental driver of his research of the process of rationalization, leading him to a philosophical-historical perspective" (2011, 122). On the other hand, as Babakhani, Bizhan *et al.* point out, religion is essential for individual mysticism and to find the truth on the human path, although it must be clarified that "Kierkegaardian faith does not presuppose religion or legal ethics, but it does go beyond the meta-rational and meta-ethical domain" (2017, 636). Faith is one of the arenas of the existence of each person. A person would have to be in love in order to go beyond reason.

Bizhan adds, "It is important to bear in mind that for Kierkegaard, faith is primarily God's blessings and mercy; it is a gift from God more than the practice of religious commands, the acquisition of spirituality and the achievement of truth" (2017, 636). By rejecting reason, morality and scientific principles, and by questioning history, Kierkegaard is actually critiquing the objective evolution of Christianity that has come to regard Jesus Christ as merely a scientific object that occurred once in history, „The spiritual aspect of an existential person chooses and is chosen. Both mystics insist on the spiritual journey as the source of movement. Both return to worldly matters. Both see man in heaven, one by existence and selective choices. However, man remains due to his inner knowledge; he determines to be present in horizons, habits or in the dark solitude of his own cave. We seek to accept that we are human beings and we are responsible for our choices" (Bizhan and all 2017, 645).

In this way, we believe that Kierkegaard's perspective could not conceive of a process of rationalization of beliefs and religions as Weber does, because in the final analysis, the objective and historical critique that he undertakes undermines Christianity as a salvation religion, by considering that a true Christian is the person who chooses freely and justly. Choice is against the absolute Thou. The option is always exercised open to an eternal infinite for each human being (*Apud*. Bizhan and all 2017). In other words: "For Kierkegaard, objective and scientific principles are rational and macro-cosmic; they are examples in the field of science and material matters and cannot be measured by the standards of faith. Science affirms that it can understand everything by reducing it to Aristotelian and rational doctrines. By rejecting Hegelian rationality as well as philosophical reason, Kierkegaard paves the way for the state of meta-religion or paradoxical faith" (Bizhan and all 2017, 645).

#### 4. Mesoamerica, reason and passion

Now we proceed to contrast Weber's approach to rationalization with other non-monotheistic belief systems. I am referring to polytheistic projects and combinations derived from syncretism, such as the traditional conceptions of peoples who were colonized (where the monotheistic religions would seem to be *nominal*, because they do not follow the Weberian protocol), or else, those of ancient civilizational horizons such as China, India or Mesoamerica, whose evolution does not necessarily lead to the rationalization posited by the German thinker.

What are the basic differences between Mesoamerican and Christian religion? For one thing, the Mesoamerican conceptions were polytheistic, in the sense of being based on a dualism of opposites that were not polar and irreducible between good and evil, but that rather were complementary opposites that gave rise to new things and were present everywhere in nature (such as night-day, light-darkness, cold-heat, etc.). It is enlightening to briefly examine some of the essential historical elements that contributed to this peculiar conception. As Alfredo López Austin writes: „Mesoamerica was a cultural tradition formed over centuries by societies of varied origins, languages, landscapes, local and regional histories, and levels of social and political development, but that shared certain important aspects of a common history. Their coexistence allowed for the ongoing exchange of goods and techniques, primarily agricultural. Their existence spanned the centuries from the beginnings of agricultural sedentarism to the Spanish colonization. Their pattern of subsistence was based on maize” (2016, 44-45).

What is important to highlight here is the fact that the millenary human presence in what is today Mexican territory produced a mosaic of

societies that gave rise to one of the world's cradles of civilization. As Guillermo Bonfil Batalla observes: „This has implications of profound importance. On the one hand, it suggests that the diverse cultures that coexisted in the precolonial past and that, transformed, still exist today as a continuation of the ancient cultures, have a common origin, and thus are the result of a single civilizational process, which gives them a fundamental unity that underlies any differences and particularities. On the other hand, the use of the term civilization refers to a level of cultural development (in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the word) that is elevated and complex enough to serve as a common basis and fundamental orientation for the historical projects of all the peoples who share this civilization” (1987, 31-32).

This wealth and diversity of religious beliefs and cultures in Mesoamerican territory is significant and has implications for the topic we are analyzing. This is why it is important to examine thoroughly. The Nahuatl people (the last to settle and expand in the center of Mexico starting in 1324) professed what could be called a religious syncretism introduced by a historical figure named Tlacaelel. It was a society that had a more or less vague idea of a supreme Dual God (*Ometeotl*), but at the same time regarded *Huitzilopochtli* as an almost all-powerful god, identified with the Sun and worshipped, together with the rain god *Tlaloc*, in the main temple of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. In terms of its attributes, the Dual God manifested itself in many other gods, difficult to classify and in a certain sense, innumerable (León-Portilla 1983).

Thus there were a number of divine pairs, including *Tlaloc* and *Chalchiuhtlicue*, god and goddess of the waters; *Mictlantecuhctli* and *Mictlancihuatl*, Lord and Lady of the netherworld; *Tezcatlipoca* and *Tezcatlanextia*, Mirror that emits smoke at night and illuminates during the day; *Quetzalcoatl* and *Quilaztli*; *Coatlicue*, the mother of *Huitzilopochtli*; *Xipe Totec*, Our Flayed Lord; *Xochipilli*, a deity that was androgynous in a certain sense, Lord and Lady of the flowers and the celebrations, etc. These were the titles of just some of the main gods of the popular Nahuatl pantheon (León-Portilla, 1983: 146).

What is pertinent to point out here is that, despite the profusion of deities, the belief was that this world, with its conditions and defects, was the only world possible. Thus, the Nahuatl thinker, reflecting on the supreme enigma, began to call the deity “Owner of the near and contiguous” (*Tloque-Nahuaque*) (León-Portilla 1983), recognizing that next to Him man wants for nothing and affirming that all beautiful things could well be manifestations of God. However, the key part of his meditation is the repetition and deepening of a tremendous doubt that afflicts him: What are we men for the deity and what is the deity for us men? (León-Portilla 1983, 140).

This was how pre-Colombian man saw himself in the midst of this fragile world and fleeting time: a being that regarded itself as “jade that



shatters and quetzal feathers that tear” (León-Portilla 1983, 141). This was the conception that prevailed and that yearned to find a firm root on which to stand. León-Portillo points out that “the word ‘truth’ (in Nahuatl *neltiliztli*) suggests the idea of root. We have also seen that for wise men (*tlamatinime*), the only way to say truthful words, to give man root, was the path of flower and song, i.e., of symbolism and poetry” (1983, 128).

It comes as no surprise that in texts like the one below we see the Nahuatl sages preoccupied with finding that truth or root that they yearn for: „Where shall I go?/ Where shall I go?/ The path of the Dual God./ Perhaps your house is where the fleshless dwell?/ Perhaps within heaven?/ Or only here on earth/ Is where the fleshless dwell?” (Anonymous poem translated and quoted by León-Portilla 1983, 142).

This component of uncertainty in Mesoamerican thinking and beliefs maintains a secular balance in terms of destiny. For example, the researcher León-Portilla, referring to the true artist, notes that “whether noble or plebeian, (the true artist, *SIC*) became a lover of song, a jester, a comedian, an artist. He took this into consideration, earned his welfare and happiness, lived joyfully, felt content insofar as he bore in mind his destiny, i.e., insofar as he admonished himself, and made himself worthy of it” (1983, 169). In contrast, he who disdained his destiny, even if he was a singer or an artist, would “spoil his own happiness, lose it, place himself above others’ faces, totally squander his destiny” (1983, 169).

In short, as we can see, the Nahuatl are interested not in contemplating the essences of things, but in securing an inner root that will hold up their face and their restless heart. Here, good and evil are not polar opposites; their way of thinking confirms, as we said before, that this world, with its conditions and defects, is the only one possible. For this reason, human morality is predominantly practical and social. It is anchored in this world, and not governed by one’s destiny in the afterlife. The consequences of human behavior are worldly in nature. True existential fulfillment is reached in this world, not in the next (*Pfr.* López Austin 2016, 55).

Just as León-Portilla observes, the pre-Hispanic poems that we know of examine two fundamental issues that are repeated over and over, revealing an ongoing preoccupation on the part of the Nahuatl sages. They ponder everything that surrounds people, particularly what is beautiful and good: flowers and songs; quetzal feathers; works of art; golden ears of maize; the faces and hearts of friends; the whole world, which has lived through different ages or suns (*see* León-Portilla 1983, 127). This vision of things explains why among the ancient Nahuatl, sexuality was regarded in principle as a pleasurable activity, an erotic act rather than a reproductive one (López Hernández 2016): „Listen well, my daughter, my little girl: the Earth is not a pleasant place; there is no happiness, no joy. It is said that joy comes only with fatigue, joy with affliction here on Earth. This is what the old people go around saying: so that we do not spend our lives

weeping, so that people do not perish of sorrow, he, Our Lord, saw fit to give us laughter, dreams and our sustenance, our strength, our exuberance. And one thing more: the earthly drive [sex], to serve as reproduction” (*Florentine Codex* 1950-1982: lib. VI, chap. XVIII, 93, translation by López Austin 1996, 276).

Now, taking into consideration the cultural complexity we have taken pains to reflect, it is time to ask ourselves about the effects produced by the arrival of Christianity in Mesoamerica and its evolution to the present day (considering that America and Africa were the regions where the processes of Western domination over the local religions and cultures was implacable). Broadly speaking, López Austin summarizes the effects in Mesoamerica: „The clash between two very different ways of seeing the world, the Christian and the Mesoamerican, has generated a wide range of perceptions among the indigenous. For example, when it came to the sacred or supernatural figures, God the Father was identified with the heavens; Christ, with the sun; the Virgin Mary, with Mother Earth; while the patron saints of the different towns were adapted -as far as possible and in secret- to the former patron gods. The Devil, on the other hand, was not clearly understood due to his utterly evil nature, and all of them, primarily Christ and the saints, were not conceived in their historical existence but as beings from the liminal world, the time when the world was created. Other beliefs were rejected or accepted only with difficulty, among them eternal life after earthly death, with its dimension of reward and punishment” (2016a, 55).

Now the question arises, what features or aspects do *indigenous religions* have today in Mesoamerica? All or almost all the religions are nominally Christian, even though in almost all cases the sacred figures have been resymbolized. When it comes to worship, beliefs and institutions, these emerged within each town’s agricultural religious matrix, i.e., nourished by both Christian and local elements. Of course, worship practices follow the guidelines of outside church institutions. “They have adopted Catholic liturgy and organizations, but in a resymbolized form, and they recognize as valid the wisdom passed down over generations, commonly referred to as ‘custom’” (López Austin 2016a, 55).

The surprising thing is that the Weberian rationalization process simply does not hold water. And, as López Austin insists, there is one more element: “the construction of the colonial cosmovision is still going on. It continues to be a creation that responds to living history. And it is still colonial, in spite of the social and political transformations in the different countries where the direct descendants of the Mesoamerican peoples live” (López Austin 2016a, 55). However, as Félix Báez-Jorge points out: „It would be absurd to argue that the indigenous peoples of our day represent an uninterrupted expression of the pre-Columbian world. Their subaltern condition is the result of the complex dynamics of colonial domination, of

multiple transculturations, of ongoing counter-hegemonic activity and creativity aimed at defending their cultural heritage within the frameworks of political and social oppression, aggravated by neoliberal regimes” (2009, 15).

## 5. Conclusions

As we have seen throughout this brief exploration, things are not entirely in place. The main purpose of our analysis has actually been to dispute the validity of Max Weber’s sociological conception of the process of rationalization for all societies and creeds, which he considers universal, taking as a point of departure his studies of Judaism, his considerations of the Christian salvation religions and his exercise of comparison/contrast that led him to dismiss other religions, such as polytheism in China and India, as backward.

For this, we have turned, on the one hand, to the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, who goes beyond reason, morality, Christianity and the social determinisms proposed by Weber, inasmuch as he situates the dilemma in the faith of each individual. Thus, for Kierkegaard, within each person’s sphere of freedom throughout their existence is the possibility of choosing which option to take within the outlines of their beliefs. It is an inescapable dynamic: each individual is essentially condemned to choose their path at every moment from a plurality of options.

On the other hand, we set out to make a critical examination of the antecedents and consequents of religious beliefs in Mesoamerica, with the idea of taking a deeper look at the scope, variability and currency of contemporary Christian syncretism, whose vitality and capacity for transformation have not been interrupted, nor do they correspond to Max Weber’s process of rationalization. Thus it is important to visualize religious phenomena in their condition of collective representations, “in all of their complexity and variety of mythical, magical and symbolic nuances that manifest the sentiments and the experiences of the communities that have created them and consecrated them as objects of belief (Báez-Jorge 2011, 105).

At the same time, there is actually a common thread connecting the considerations of the authors we have analyzed, especially Kierkegaard and the unorthodox Christianity of Mesoamerica, in the sense of the importance of mysticism in each human being, regardless of the country, race or religion to which they belong. As the Hindu teacher Maharaj Sawan Singh writes: “Since the Supreme Creator is One, and the structure of human beings is the same everywhere, how could there be one path for Hindus, another for Muslims, and yet another for Christians? The mystics who reached the supreme level shared the same ideal or goal, and

although their writings were written in different languages, they were not committed to a particular religion or creed [...] The Word that gives salvation is neither spoken nor written. In other words, it can be affirmed that this Word (or stream of sound) is not contained in any sacred scripture or religion" (1930, XX-XXI).

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