THE GOSPEL OF POVERTY: THE MESSAGE OF CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM TO THE POOR AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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An article simply entitled "Wealth" appeared in the *North American Review* of June 1889. The editor declared that this article written by the articulate industrialist Andrew Carnegie was "the finest article I have ever published in the Review." The former bobbin boy detailed three "modes" by which the wealthy man could dispose of his surplus: "It can be left to the families of the descendants; or it can be bequeathed for public purposes; or, finally it can be administered during their lives by its possessors." Carnegie held that the first was "the most injudicious." The failure of man to dispose of his accumulated wealth during his lifetime marked him as selfish and lacking in foresight.

The rich man is thus almost restricted to following the examples of Peter Cooper, Enoch Pratt of Baltimore, Mr. Pratt of Brooklyn, Senator Stanford, and others, who know that the best means of benefiting the community is to place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise—parks, and means of recreation, by which men are helped in body and mind; works of art, certain to give pleasure and improve the public taste, and public institutions of various kinds, which will improve the general condition of the people; in this manner returning their surplus wealth to the mass of their fellows in the forms best calculated to do them lasting good.

The solution to the problem of wealth and poverty, the rich and the poor had been discovered. "Such, in my opinion," said Carnegie, "is the true Gospel concerning Wealth . . . ."

Few literate Americans at the turn of the century escaped exposure to Carnegie's apologia for the accumulation of wealth. The spirit of acquisitiveness abroad in the land had assumed enormous prestige and support. From 1890 to the present the upholding of this doctrine, or attack upon it, the examination and re-examination of Carnegie's and succeeding positions have led to the development of a sizable body of literature on the Gospel according to "Saint Andrew."

Studies of the Gospel of Wealth normally cite the writings of President James McCosh of Princeton and Noah Porter of Yale, Russell Conwell, whose "Acres of Diamonds" was supposed to have

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been repeated six thousand times throughout the East and Midwest, and conclude with the benediction of the Right Reverend William Lawrence, Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts. But lesser men, ministers of all the major Protestant denominations, who were often closer to the people, endorsed the same general principles with equal and sometimes greater fervor. They held that wealth and civilization went together and provided man with the possibility of rest and reflection. The worshipers at Plymouth Congregational Church in Indianapolis heard that “Wealth is the rich soil in which a human soul-root unfolds its powers and becomes its possibility. God meant we should flee poverty.” The question of accumulation was not one that the Christian could view dispassionately. The chancellor of Nebraska Wesleyan University pointed out that it was no sin to get money provided it was done through honest methods: “Indeed to gain in this way is a Christian duty.”

Through the assiduous application of their Christian duty men such as George Peabody and A. T. Stewart made millions of dollars. Charles E. Bronson, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Saginaw, Michigan, thanked God for the noble examples of John Wanamaker and Chauncey Depew, who proved to the young men of America that it was possible to reach the highest posts in business and at the same time preserve the Christian character. Of course they did not do these things alone, for God put the twelve millions of dollars in Peabody’s hands. “Everybody honors him because he saved his country from financial ruin, set up institutions of learning, and because he was always looking for an opportunity to make some one happy,” S. P. Long told the First Lutheran Church of Mansfield, Ohio. To accomplish these good works a man had to be determined, sometimes even as harsh as A. T. Stewart when he sent a servant out of his home because she burned the two ends of a match when matches were very dear. When the girl’s father found fault with the great merchant for giving a large sum to the church the next week, Stewart replied, “If I had not saved

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9Oscar C. McCulloch, The Open Door: Sermons and Prayers (Indianapolis, 1892), p. 145. McCulloch who was minister of Plymouth Congregational Church, Indianapolis, Indiana, made this statement in a sermon entitled “The New Vow of Poverty.” John Sweet, pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, Owosso, Michigan said much the same thing: “Money is power, and all power is good in the hands of those who know its proper place and use,” in C. S. Eastman, ed., The Methodist Episcopal Pulpit (Monroe, Michigan, 1897), p. 140.
12S. P. Long, The Eternal Epistle: Sermons on the Epistles for the Church Year (Columbus, 1908), p. 399.
the two ends of the match, I could not have given this large sum for this benevolent cause."  

The Christian benefactor was a selfless man who gave mostly to religious institutions and did so with some self-effacement. On this count even the great and generous Carnegie did not escape the chastisement of the irascible S. P. Long. When the wealthy ironmonger refused to support Wesleyan University and the Protestant Hospital of Columbus, Long concluded that he was no Christian. Long also resented the Carnegie library program. "I do not blame a man even like Carnegie for putting up a library in every city if he can get the dumb public to pay for half of his monument." He held that the difference between a man of God and a man of the world is that the man of the world wants all the glory himself while the man of God wants the glory to go where it belongs, to the God who gave him the money.  

While righteousness and business success normally went hand in hand, all affairs of men were seen as guided by God's unerring wisdom. "He knows when to give and when to withhold, when to check and when to impel, when to enrich and when to impoverish, when to create and when to destroy," wrote Lutheran theologian Luther Gotwald in *Joy in the Divine Government*. In short, God cannot be guilty of the slightest mistake. The students of Matthias Loy, Professor of Theology in the Evangelical Lutheran Seminary at Columbus, Ohio, were told that this same God assigns men to their place in society. One man was a merchant prince, another but a servant in his house or a mechanic in his shops. To complain, therefore, was to show a thankless heart and behave in a manner unworthy of a Christian who knows that God bestows different gifts. If his place in society was lower than that of another, he should not be envious of the man whose station was higher. Since each man receives only what is right and fair in the eyes of the Lord, each individual should be content with his lot in life.  

But it was not altogether likely that the poor, content in the knowledge that it was God's will, would accept a perpetual state of poverty. Many Protestant ministers at the turn of the century recognized this possibility. The revolt of the Grangers and Populists, the railway strikes and the Haymarket Riot were convincing evidence that this situation was unfortunately true. As a conse-

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10 Luther A. Gotwald, *Joy in the Divine Government; and Other Sermons* (New York, 1901), p. 8. Matthias Loy, *Sermons on the Epistles for the Sundays and Chief Festivals of the Church Year* (Columbus, 1860), pp. 143-144. These statements have the same tone as those of Henry Ward Beecher a half century earlier in *Life Thoughts* (Boston, 1858), p. 181. "We have aristocrats, but God made them. . . . It was designed that some should be high, some intermediate, and some low, as trees are some forty, some a hundred, and some, the giant pines, (how solitary their tops must be!) three hundred feet in height."
quence, to provide for those to whom the "Gospel of Wealth" did not apply, they built an elaborate rationale that might be called the "Gospel of Poverty." This statement did not appear as one simple and consistent declaration of good news to the poor but rather as a variety of assertions which can be seen as variations on the basic theme.

Perhaps the least acceptable answer to the question was the one proposed by the Lutheran minister, Olaf Lysnes. If you have accepted Jesus then you are independently rich even though you may be poor in this world’s goods. Suddenly you belong to the nobility of the household of faith. In Minneapolis the members of the First Baptist Church heard much the same message. "Talk about Poverty! He is not the poorest man who is out of money, whose buildings have gone up in smoke, whose deposit account is swallowed up in bankruptcy. The poorest man is the man who is without God, and without hope, the man from whom the Scriptures have been snatched away." Thus did the Reverend Doctor William B. Riley admonish the city’s poor in Messages For the Metropolis.

If the poor still chafed under the burden of their worldly troubles they were counselled to keep in mind that their troubles were really of no consequence. Samuel Smith Harris, Episcopal Bishop of Michigan declared that he did have a gospel for the poor which they would find soothing, for it was full of the good news of hope, love and life. This gospel proclaimed that the wants and needs, the poverty of the unfortunate man, belonged to a world that was passing away. God had another world, a real world, in store for him where all inequalities of the present life would be redressed, for God had reserved all of eternity merely to console the poor. Heaven would be

An eternity of peace for the troubled, of rest for the weary, of joy for the afflicted, when men and women and children shall hunger no more, and thirst no more; where there shall be no more pain, neither sorrow nor crying, for God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. Ah, yes, this begins to sound like good news indeed, like a real gospel to the poor.

S. P. Long, who preached to as many as three thousand people

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11 Olaf Lysnes, "The purpose of Jesus’ Poverty," in Pastors of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, a Free Text Church Postil (Minneapolis, 1913), pp. 36-37.
13 S. P. Long in The Great Gospel, pp. 568-569, wrote, “Who are the poor people in this city of Mansfield? The very people who are giving nothing to God.”
14 Samuel Smith Harris, The Dignity of Man; Select Sermons (Chicago, 1889), p. 292. Bishop Matthew Simpson of the Methodist Episcopal Church preached much the same doctrine when he said, “If I have but little treasure on earth, I can have treasure laid up in heaven. There are rich men on earth who will not be rich in eternity; and there are poor men who will be rich in the day of the Lord Jesus; and if the mind can be thrown forward thus, how this view of the future will compensate for the privations of the present!” Sermons by Bishop Matthew Simpson (New York, 1885), p. 292.
each Sunday in Mansfield, Ohio, addressed himself to the topic of “Plain Philosophy for Poor People” on Christmas morning, 1903. He called the attention of his congregation to “those homes in the tenement houses, dark, black, filthy rooms, drunken husbands, sometimes no clothing to wear, no bread to eat, no decent meal for the children, and it almost makes our hearts bleed.” Yet there was another side to this question. Christ the Savior of the world was born not even in a tenement, but as the poorest child on earth never was born, in a low, common stable in order that the poor might have comfort.

There is comfort for the poorest people in the world; they can live until they die, and that is all the rich can do. We are here, my friends, to live, and it does not take a great deal to exist, and when life is done there is just as much in store for the poorest man that ever lived as there is for the wealthiest. When life is over, then comes death, and let me say to all the poor this morning, that that is all the rich have; they simply live and at the end of life comes death; they take nothing with them, and how much better off are they than the poorest?

The poorest people can live and die saved. “This my friend is the true philosophy of a Christian—Plain Philosophy for Poor People.”

The Presbyterian leader J. G. K. McClure, President of McCormick Theological Seminary, held that people could gain an insight into the entire question of poverty by seeing how Jesus dealt with it when he told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor. Actually, Christ did not mean that man should take the injunction literally, for the young ruler would become forever a poor man himself and such a step would be most unwise. Christ felt so deeply for the poor that he would never do anything to weaken or hurt them. The outright gift of money would be the worst possible use of the young ruler’s goods because it would discourage efforts for self-support and thus most certainly injure the poor. “What the poor always need—whether they are poor in money, or poor in strength, or poor in comfort, is stimulus and encouragement to rise above their circumstances, to struggle beyond them, to have a larger spirit, and to put forth an earnest effort.” This treatment of the question, an evasion of the real issue, seemed to be quite standard in Protestant circles at the turn of the century.

If man needed a stimulus to rise, as McClure suggested, no better one could be found than in poverty itself assisted by calamity.

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15 James G. K. McClure, Loyalty; The Soul of Religion (Chicago, 1905), pp. 94-95. S. P. Long in Prophetic Pearls (Columbus, 1913), p. 195, wrote, “We never can help this world back to God till we mingle with the poor and extend them a warm, helping hand.”
In fact, it would be disastrous to do away with poverty, for it was a most valuable condition. Just as gold and silver are dug out of rugged mountains, so out of the hardships of life come some of the richest treasures of human experience and of human character. Many of the greatest men in history have come from the most humble surroundings, and had they not been faced by this challenge of poverty they might never have reached the heights of fame. The struggle with poverty and hardship developed a strength of character that could not be found in any other way. The best thing in life was to struggle with these difficulties and overcome them. It was much better that a man struggle with poverty, than with wealth, for “through the liftlock prosperity, one man passes upward while ninety-nine pass downward. Through adversity one man passes downward while ninety-nine pass upward.” Obviously, our society must preserve and cherish poverty to develop men of character in the future.

The man who could find no consolation in adversity as a stimulus to building character and who, though striving mightily, still failed to rise above his poverty, was counselled in another fashion. As a mere “drudge” in an industrial society he must cultivate a spirit of love “ere he is perfectly at home and happy in his task.” His honor was at stake to do his humble part in God’s plan. “The vision of someone who is helped will be his final motive to the humble and complete and glad offering up of himself.” Through his faithfulness others were made rich. “The factory hand, the miner under ground, the seamstress in her chamber, the laborer by the roadside, wear out their lives for others’ comfort. In the accomplishment of great enterprises how many die for the honor and the progress of mankind!” Congregationalists in Wilmette, Illinois, and Presbyterians in West Bay City, Michigan, were thus admonished to give their all in the name of progress.

The new industrial society continued to widen the gap between the poor, who seemed only to become poorer, and the rich whose wealth seemed continually to accumulate. Because of the growing disparity a very definite effort was made to prove to the poor how

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17 P. E. Holp, Pastor of the Congregational Church, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, In The Golden Age and Other Sermons (Sioux Falls, 1887), p. 177. Precisely the same point of view was expressed by the Disciples of Christ minister J. Z. Tyler in Talks to Young People (Cincinnati, 1896), pp. 15–16; the Presbyterian minister David Edwards Beach in Sermons and Addresses (Marietta, Ohio, 1890), pp. 199, 272, 276; and the Lutheran minister Luther A. Gotwald in Joy in the Divine Government, pp. 12, 58. These expressions were in the same vein as those of Henry Ward Beecher in Life Thoughts published in 1858, p. 73, when he said “How blessed, then, is the stroke of disaster which sets the children free, and gives them over to the hard but kind bosom of Poverty, who says to them, ‘Work!’ and, working, makes them men!”
very much they actually had to be thankful for. B. L. McElroy of
the First Methodist Episcopal Church, Ann Arbor, Michigan,
stressed a "doctrine of compensation," which, he said, "is cal-
culated to be of service to all who have not made themselves utterly
'reason-proof.?' " This doctrine proposed some measure of mediation
between the rich and the poor. McElroy hoped that the gap between
these two groups would be narrowed if men would just remember
that "for everything they have missed they have gained something
else." Possession became only another name for relinquishment. If
the poor would only open their eyes to that fact they would look
without envy on the holdings of the rich. By way of illustrating this
principle, the Episcopal rector in Muscatine, Iowa, notes that most
wealthy men had ruined their health in the process of acquiring
their riches and then would have given all their accumulated wealth
if only they could have had in return the good health of the com-
mon laboring man.

In the kitchen of the General Otto H. Falk mansion as it over-
looks Lake Michigan from Milwaukee is a plaque hung at the turn
of the century by the General for the edification of his servants.
The central portion of the plaque shows a happy, care-free servant
giving counsel to a troubled king. Beneath the figures an inscription
reads: "Riches are always restless; 'tis only to poverty the gods
give content." Falk, a good Episcopalian, and one-time President
of the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company, felt that this mes-
sage was salutary. This argument was carried into the pulpit by
Louis Buchheimer, a Lutheran pastor in St. Louis, and his state-
ment constitutes the ultimate exposition of the Gospel of Poverty
as it carried the good news concerning their condition to the poor.
Buchheimer pointed out that there was really no very great dis-
tinction between the gifts of God to various men. The rich man had
his park, but the poor man could look at it and enjoy it without the
expense of maintaining it. Although others lived in stately man-
sions, they had to pay very heavily for the privilege. While the rich
man may have had a valuable picture gallery, the poor man could
see in the sunrise and sunset a splendor that no artist could ever
capture. While the poor man did not possess some of the con-
veniences and delights of the more favored, in return he was free
from many embarrassments to which the wealthy were subject.
By the very simplicity and uniformity of his life the poor man was
mercifully delivered from the great variety of cares that continu-
ally plagued his wealthy brother. Surely the plain meal eaten with

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20 B. L. McElroy. The Methodist Episcopal Pulpit, pp. 256-258.
116-117.
relish and appetite by a poor man was more delicious than the most luxurious banquet.\textsuperscript{22}

Andrew Carnegie, addressing the Nineteenth Century Club at the close of 1887, exclaimed, “I defy any man to show that there is pauperism.”\textsuperscript{23} Those Protestant ministers who preached the Gospel of Poverty agreed completely with the author of the Gospel of Wealth. In Minneapolis, William B. Riley said that he knew for a fact that the inhabitants of “ninety-nine houses out of a hundred are in perfect comfort.”\textsuperscript{24} S. P. Long told his congregation that every man is supposed to own his own home.\textsuperscript{25} Even evanglist Billy Sunday, the ordained Presbyterian minister who worked with the poor and downtrodden more than did most of his brethren, said that “I do not believe that there are any people beneath the sun who are better fed, better paid, better clothed, better housed, or any happier than we are beneath the stars and stripes—no nation on earth.”\textsuperscript{26}

The working man in the United States may have been better off than his counterpart elsewhere, but how prosperous was he in the decade of the nineties? Industrialization was making the United States an increasingly wealthy nation. But hours of work were long and wages were low. According to one estimate, weekly hours of work in manufacturing industries averaged sixty in 1890 and fifty-nine in 1900, and annual earnings of all wage earners except farm laborers averaged only $486 in 1890 and $490 in 1900.\textsuperscript{27} According to the census of 1900, two-thirds of the male workers over sixteen years of age earned less than $12.50 per week.\textsuperscript{28} It is true that prices were not high. In 1898 sugar sold for 53\% cents a pound, coffee for 28 cents a pound, roasting beef for 14\% cents a pound, and milk for less than 6 cents a quart. Coal cost $6 a ton, men’s heavy shoes $2 a pair, and the best ready-made suits sold for $20 or less.\textsuperscript{29} But even with prices so low, the real income of a great many American families was very meager indeed. Without question, the condition of vast numbers of Americans at the turn of the century bordered on poverty.

Because they failed to recognize the facts of urban American industrial life as they applied to the working man, most of the Protestant clergy consistently misread the causes of poverty. The

\textsuperscript{22} Louis Buchholzer, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, St. Louis, Missouri, in Faith and Duty: Sermons on Free Texts with Reference to the Church Year (St. Louis, 1913), pp. 24, 81–82.

\textsuperscript{23} Quoted in Social Science Review (December 14, 1887), p. 9.

\textsuperscript{24} William B. Riley, Messages for the Metropolis, pp. 10–11.

\textsuperscript{25} S. P. Long, The Eternal Epistle, p. 148.

\textsuperscript{26} William T. Ellis, Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message (New York, 1936), p. 353.

\textsuperscript{27} Paul H. Douglas, Real Wages in the United States, 1890–1926 (New York, 1928), Table 147 opposite p. 392.

\textsuperscript{28} Bureau of the Census, Employees and Wages (Special Report, 1900), pp. ci–civ.

\textsuperscript{29} Bureau of the Department of Labor, No. 18 (September, 1898), p. 696.
catalog of reasons given for the existence of poverty included sloth and indifference, the failure to anticipate expenses through saving, and the use of liquor and tobacco.\textsuperscript{30} Very considerable emphasis was placed on the lack of cleanliness, thrift and economy. "If they knew those things," T. G. Soares, a Baptist minister in Oak Park, Illinois, wrote, "they would not be needy. It is foolish to be impatient with the poor, because they have not the methods and virtues of the successful. If they had them they would not be poor."\textsuperscript{31} Grinding poverty was also seen as the warning hand of God. In 1908, S. P. Long said that there were families without bread in every city in the land and the reason for it was very simple. "The good Lord cannot bear it any longer to see families go to hell with full stomachs and no knowledge of Him. So He now pulls the bell of famine and rings into our ears: 'Prepare to meet thy God!' Oh, what an unthankful world! You unthankful souls, I am surprised that God has not starved you long ago!"\textsuperscript{32} A far easier solution was not to resort to reason or explanation but simply write off the poor as did J. G. K. McClure. "People are not alike. Those who grow up in slums and are foul with evil from their youth are different from those who grew up clean and wholesome in religious homes."\textsuperscript{33}

But this was the period also of the rise of the Social Gospel. At the turn of the century Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, Shailer Mathews, Harry F. Ward and Charles Stelzle were issuing a clarion call to the churches to accept their social responsibilities and reorient the pattern of Protestant thought and action to meet the challenge of a rapidly developing urban, industrial society. The impetus within the churches for a Social Gospel was provided, however, by only a small but articulate group. These liberal Protestant leaders represented the religious part of the Progressive period in American history. The \textit{Social Creed of the Churches} adopted by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America in 1912 was the high point of the Social Gospel.\textsuperscript{34} But it had little or no impact on the average Protestant minister in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, or Mansfield, Ohio, largely because the Protestant church had, by the turn of the century, been captured...
by the middle class and because most Protestant ministers simply
did not understand the age in which they lived.

The clergy were not prepared to meet the new problems of the
city and industry directly, for they had no contact with them. Only
very rarely did ministerial candidates come from those classes pro-
duced by modern industrial society—the very rich and the urban,
industrial poor. Charles Stelzle once observed that the average
Protestant minister believed that having come from a poor home
he was in a position to sympathize with the unfortunate. At the
same time these ministers completely failed to comprehend the
problems of industrial and urban poverty and unemployment.
Stelzle made a survey of ministers to study this matter and found
that fully ninety per cent of the men that he interviewed in city
churches had been born and reared in what might be classed as
rural areas. The poverty to which they referred was the simple
life of the small town or of the farm which was quite a different
thing from the pangs of cold and hunger which he had experienced
in city tenements. Leaving their rural areas for college and the
seminary, they had no occasion to encounter the realities of city
life as they affected the urban poor. The result was an ever-
widening rift between the American worker and Protestantism.35

To an increasing extent, the great American middle class came to
sustain the churches of the major Protestant denominations as the
nineteenth century progressed. Clearly the upper and lower strata
of society, both from an economic and educational point of view,
had by the turn of the century ceased to actively support these
denominations. Now the “solid” and “responsible” middle class,
including the employers, salaried persons, small tradesmen and
farmers, came to be identified with the major Protestant denomina-
tions. Among them were also included those who had a personal or
sympathetic attachment to this class or were engaged in personal
service. Some ministers candidly admitted that their churches min-
istered primarily to the middle class.36

What was the answer of Protestantism to the new age that was
emerging at the turn of the century? The great mass of the Protes-
tant clergy, conservative in temper and philosophy, beholden to

35 Charles Stelzle, A Son of the Bovery: The Life of an East Side American (New
York, 1928), pp. 82–83. In a sample of 1800 ministers taken in 1930 it was found
that only 12 per cent were reared in cities over 100,000 population and 48 per cent came
from communities of less than 1000. In this same sample, less than 1 per cent reported
the economic status of their parents as wealthy, about 4 percent said their parents
were poor. Well over half stated that their fathers were farmers or small tradesmen.
Mark A. May, “Theological Education,” in Samuel McCrea Cavert and Henry Pitney
Van Dusen, eds., The Church Through Half a Century: Essays in Honor of William
36 Andreas Bard, The Dawn of To-Morrow and Other Sermons (Burlington, Iowa,
their middle class congregations, beat a dismal retreat in the face of growing problems. This trend can be seen in Manhattan where, in the period before 1900, 40 Protestant churches left the district below 20th Street while 300,000 immigrants and workers moved into the same area.\(^7\) Most ministers were not conscious of society as a whole except to resent the intrusion of new problems on their peace of mind. The course of least resistance was to maintain the old individualistic approach and respond to the new questions with the same old answers. The Gospel of Poverty was the message of conservative Protestantism to the poor at the turn of the century. Perhaps it was just as well that few of the class for which this gospel was intended ever heard the sermons preached ostensibly for their benefit to middle class congregations. However, the development of this message was an interesting intellectual exercise for many a conservative Protestant clergyman and provided peace of mind for the middle class parishioner.

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