A Critical Analysis of Thomas Aquinas's Doctrine of the Image of God

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Abstract

The basic issues of our time concern the spiritual substance of a free society, as it has historically derived from the central Christian concept of the image of God. However, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the meaning of the image of God, and examine this doctrine under two rubrics: natural theology and divine revelation. Such an analytical study would, mainly, rely on the Biblical texts and the Christian literature of the Church Fathers, besides the basic works of St. Thomas Aquinas and other theologians such as John of Damascus, Athanasius, Augustine and Pseudo- Didnysius.

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Of all the doctrines of St. Thomas Aquinas, there is perhaps none whose present- day significance is greater than that of his teaching that man was made after the image of God. As the late **John Courtney Murray** put it, "*the basic issues of our time concern the spiritual substance of a free society, as it has historically derived from the central Christian concept, res sacra homo"* (We hold These Truths, 1964). And *res sacra homo* is another Latin term for *imago Dei*. Although the doctrine had occupied the attention of Christian thinkers since the days of the Church Fathers, there was by no means a consensus about its meaning. Probably the most extensive theological debate over "image" had dealt not with man as *imago Dei*, but with the legitimacy of the use of images in Christian worship; yet even in this iconoclastic controversy the problem of the *imago Dei* in man had played an important role.

Thomas' doctrine of the image, like all of his theology, was an effort to interpret the tradition of the Church Fathers faithfully and yet critically, and it is therefore a useful index of his theological method in this respect. It also illustrates his method in an even more basic way, for the doctrine of *imago Dei* belongs simultaneously to natural theology and to revelation.

In this paper I want to examine it under these two rubrics, basing my analysis on part I, Question 93 of the **Summa Theologiae**, as illuminated by other parts of Thomas' work, especially by his comments **on the Sentences** and by Question 10 of **On Truth** [De Vertitate].

The doctrine of the image of God was an important element of the natural theology of Thomas. In fact, it formed the fundamental presupposition for natural theology in his thought. It did not appear in Thomas' celebrated presentation of the "five ways" by which he argued that it was possible for the mind of man to know and to demonstrate the existence of God; here the classic text about the natural knowledge of God from the creation, **Romans 1: 19- 20,** and the "towering text" (Murray, Problem of God, 1964) on Christian ontology, **Exodus 3: 14**, provided the biblical justification for Thomas' argument, while man's having been created in the image of God played no direct role (STI.2.2.3). Even where a consideration of the objection that "*the soul does not understand anything by natural reason without an image, [and] we can not have an image of God, who is incorporeal*" (STI.12.12.obj. 2)

seemed to be an open invitation to refer to the image in man as a refutation of this ground for opposition to the idea of the natural knowledge of God, Thomas did not make use of this resource, contenting himself with the reply that "*God is known by natural knowledge through the images of his effects*". Curiously, he did not use theologoumenon of the image of God in angels to substantiate the natural knowledge of God in angels (STI.56.3 resp.), but did not do so in considering the natural knowledge of God in man. But the exposition of the proofs for the existence of God and of the natural knowledge of God at the beginning of part I of the **Summa Theologiae** was supplemented in later questions, and here in Question 93 of Part I Thomas made explicit the anthropological- and, if one may use the term, psychological- basis for the proofs.

With a cross- reference to these earlier considerations of natural theology, Thomas first reiterated his frequent distinction between the natural knowledge of God and the kind of knowledge and love that was "meritorious" (STI.93.8 ad 3); this latter was not by nature, but only by grace. But it was also by nature that the mind could have "*knowledge and love of God in some sense*". Such a knowledge of God, as was evident in the five ways, was attainable by the use of human reason, which was present in man also after the fall of Adam. Because reason continued to be an attribute even of fallen man and therefore a "natural" quality and power, it followed that the image of God had remained in the human mind. The converse of this would be that it was the permanence of the image of God in man that assured the continuing power of reason and therefore the very possibility of the natural knowledge of God. From **Augustine**'s insistence that the human soul was rational and intellectual even when reason appeared to be quite "torbid" in a particular individual, Thomas drew the conclusion that reason was never absent from the human mind, and that therefore none was utterly devoid of the divine image. Thus it properly belonged also to natural theology to consider the image of God in man. Nor was it valid to maintain that because the doctrine of the Trinity was a matter of revelation and was not accessible to natural knowledge, there could not be an image of the three persons of the Trinity in man (STI.93.5 obj. 3); for, again paraphrasing **Augustine** , the Trinity in man was something that could be seen, while the Trinity in God was something that had to be believed.

It would be both "natural" and "reasonable" to suppose that, as an article of the natural theology of Thomas, the image of God would find substantiation in the writings of classical antiquity, especially in the works of the ancient philosophers. The **Neo-platonic** doctrine of archetypes contained elements that could have been developed- and indeed were by some early Christian writers, including **Pseudo-Dionysius**- into an anticipation and a counterpart of the biblical metaphor of the image of God. One would expect, therefore, that Thomas, too, in his endeavor to give nature its due, would have drawn upon philosophical sources for the content of the image of God in natural man. One of the most widely read theological treatises on the doctrine of man in this century confirms this expectation: "*In Thomas Aquinas*", it says, "*intellectualistic and biblical conceptions of the image of God are compounded, with the Aristotelian elements achieving predominance*" (Niebuhr, 1941). Similar statements occur in other theological literature. When we turn from the secondary accounts to the **Summa Theologiae**, it is almost a shock to discover how insignificant a part is played there by these so- called "Aristotelian elements" or, for that matter, by any elements drawn from the thought of pre- Christian philosophers. There are, it seems, only two specific citations of **Aristotle** in all Question 93 on the image of God: the first is a reference to the **Categories**, introduces with the formula *dicitur*, where it is said that "substance" is not liable to an increase or a decrease (Meta.4.15; 1021a11); the second, with the formula *ut dicitur in Meta[physica*], asserts that "oneness in quality [*unum in qualtate*] causes likeness (STI.93.9 resp.), the latter term being, of course, the second member of the pair of terms used in the creation story in **Genesis**, "image" and "likeness". In neither passage was Aristotle referred to either by name or as *ille philosophus*. There were not, as nearly as I can determine, any other references to philosophical or pagan sources, although there are, as I shall point out, some parallels in such sources to some of the statements being made; the very absence of citations from such sources,, some of which were certainly known to Thomas, is itself deserving of notice in a doctrine where "Aristotelian elements" are supposed to have "achieved predominance".

As all the specific facts adduced in the "five ways" proving the existence of God indicate, consideration of the natural knowledge of God in man is obliged to pay attention not only to God and to man, but also to

"nature" in the sense in which Thomas occasionally used the word, that is, to non rational creatures. One issue in the doctrine of the image of God as a part of natural theology, therefore, was the implication of the doctrine for non rational creatures. This issue was addressed in article 2 of question 93. As I noted earlier, the nearest pagan counterpart to the doctrine of the image of God was probably to be found in such Neo-Platonic notions as type and archetype, which could not be confined to the nature of man. From these **Neo- Platonic** sources they had come into Christian thought through such channels as the speculations of **Pseudo-Dionysius** the **Areopagite** and the religiously neutral **Consolation of Philosophy** of **Boethius**. It is upon these two bodies of writing that Thomas drew for his examination of the question whether there was an image of God also in non rational creatures. Dionysius had used the term "images" in his treatise **On the Divine Names** to identify links in what he called the "chain" that bound together various levels of reality. "*Things that are caused*", he said in the translation used by Thomas, "*have the contingent images of the things that cause them*". He had also identified the radiance of the sun as the most accurate created likeness of the goodness of God; in this he was drawing upon the Greek patristic tradition, most notably articulated by **Athanasius**, and ultimately upon the **New Testament** (**Hebrews 1:3**), where the term "radiance" was employed to specify the relation of Christ as Son of God to the Father. **Boethius' Consolation**, which performed some of the same function in the West that the **Dionysian** corpus performed in the East, had likewise found in the term "image" a way of describing the reality of "the created world" as it was formed and carried by the mind of the Maker. It would be plausible to conclude from this statement of **Boethius** that the quality of being "after the image of God" was not restricted to rational creatures, but should be attributed to the entire world (STI.93.2 obj. 4).

For his response to these two eminent patristic authorities, Thomas took up the specification of the terms appearing in the quotations. Thus Dionysius had not simply called effects "images" of their causes, but had made clear that they were "contingent images". This qualification meant, according to Thomas, that such realities were not "images" in the strict sense of the word, but only to the extent that- not by necessity but by contingency (STI.22.4 ad 3)- they happen to participate in the notion of the image, because, and to the extent that, even in their imperfection, they

participated in that which was perfect; for they did have "*some sort of likeness to God*" (STI.93.2 ad 1). Now this explanation of the language of **Dionysius** might suffice for some of the many images he applied to the relation between the Creator and the entire creation- images such as the "chain", referred to earlier- but something more was needed to make sense of the "metaphysics of light" underlying the second reference from Dionysius; for this was not merely one concept among others, but the decisive metaphor in the ontology of Dionysius and of much of the Greek patristic tradition before and after him, climaxing in the doctrine of "uncreated light" in the **Hesychastic Theology** of **Gregory Palamas**. When Thomas had come, in the earlier question in Part 1 of the **Summa** (STI.67.1), to study the relation between "light" and other figurative ways of speaking about God, he cited a statement from Dionysius as an authority for the important place of this term among the names for God and an even more unequivocal one from **Augustine**, who had said that "*Christ is not called light in the same sense as he is called stone; the former is to be taken strictly, and the latter metaphorically*", yet he put all of this aside, drawing upon a statement of **Ambrose**, who had included the term "radiance" from **Hebrews 1:3** among the many metaphorical names for God and Christ with which he opened the second book of his opus **De Fide**, written for the emperor **Gratian**. In much the same way Thomas proceeded here in Question 93, article 2 to base Dionysius' statement about the light of the sun as bearing the greatest similitude to the goodness of God upon the analogy between the "causality" the attributable to the sun and that which belonged to God, rather than upon the "*Intrinsic worth of its nature, which is required for the idea of image*" (Ibid. ad 2). This satisfied the immediate purpose, but did not address the larger issue. Thomas' way of coping with the passage from **Boethuis** was more apt. Acknowledging that the term "image" could be used in more than one sense, he gave the following definition for the term as it had been employed by Boethius: "*the likeness by which a work of art imitates the exemplar of the art that is in the mind of the artist*". But here in the doctrine of the image of God the term "image" referred more particularly to a "likeness of nature". In this specific sense, then, all things could be said to have such a likeness to God as "first being" insofar as they themselves were beings, and in the Boethian sense every creature could be said to be "*the image of the exemplar which it has*

in the mind of God". And so, as Thomas said a little later, "*there is in all creatures some sort of likeness to God*" (STI.93.6 resp. ; ibid. 9. resp.).

But he immediately went on to say that although this was true, yet "*it is only in the rational creature that a likeness to God in the form of an image is to be found*". Yet if "image of God" was not an accurate term for the created world as a whole or for the non- rational creatures in it, except in the broader sense of the term employed for example by **Boethius**, was it, strictly speaking, an accurate term even for all the human species? Did the term apply to the female of the species as well as to the male? To make this question as urgent as possible before he brushed it aside, Thomas- it seems deliberately- misquoted the words of the apostle **Paul** in **1 Corinthians 11:7** to read, "*the man is the image of God, but woman is the image of man*". {The passage actually reads, also in Thomas' Latin version, "*He [the man] is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man*"}. In his refutation of this objection (STI.93.4 ad1), Thomas did not make a point of correcting the misquotation, but countered it with the words of the creation story in **Genesis**: "*After the image of God He [God] created him [man]; male and female He created them*". This verse did not, of course, assert in so many words that woman, too, was created after the image of God; and even Augustine's reference to the biblical rejection of the androgynous myth did not entirely resolve the matter. Thomas added, moreover, that the female found her "origin and goal" in the male , just as God was the origin and goal of all creatures; and for this he quoted **1 Corinthians 11:7** again, adding the next two verse for amplification of the argument. The discussion of the status of woman and of the relation between man and woman in the divine creation had occupied Thomas in the question immediately preceding this one on the image of God. Therefore he was able to dispose rather quickly of this objection, and even more quickly of a notion, labeled by Augustine as "not probable" and as "erroneous" but by Thomas as "prima facie absurd", that the male represented the Father in the Trinity, the female represented the Holy Spirit, and their child represented the Son (STI.93.6 ad2).

A more serious obstacle to the claim that all members of the human race had the divine image was derived from the tendency of some passages of the **New Testament** and of some statements in the fathers to

connect the image of God directly with Jesus Christ and hence to confine it as an anthropological term to those who could be said to be "in Christ". Although the christological bearing of the image of God will occupy us a little later in this paper, when we discuss the image as a datum of revelation in Thomas, the tendency to which I refer also pertains to the matter of natural theology. For if, as it seemed to say, there was no image of God in those who were apart from Christ and his revelation, then the universality of the image of God would have to be surrendered; indeed, as we have seen, Thomas would then be obliged to forfeit his entire scheme of demonstrations of the existence of God, since the presupposition for their probative force was the universality and the persistence of the image. At issue now was not chiefly the finiteness of man and his consequent incapacity to grasp the infinity of God, but the sin of man and his alienation from the holiness of God. An irreducible minimum in the content of the term "image of God" seemed certainly to be some sort of likeness between the image and the original. "*But as a result of sin*", Thomas said, "*man becomes unlike God*". Did this mean that "*therefore he loses the image of God*" (STI.93.4 obj3)? From among sinners, moreover, God had, according to **Romans 8:29**, foreknown some to be conformed to the image of his Son, and these he had predestined; since not all were predestined, did this mean that "*not all human beings have a conformity to the image*" (Ibid. obj.2)? To deal with this objections, it was necessary to distinguish between the image of God according to nature and the image according to grace and glory: according to nature man had never lost the image of God and hence did not need to have it restored, while according to grace it was restored, albeit imperfectly, and according to glory it was to be restored perfectly and completely (Ibid. resp.). Considered according to nature, therefore, all men still had the image of God.

Such an affirmation would, however, carry more sound than meaning unless the content of the image were specified. One conceivable specification of it would be to locate it in the body of man, since, after all, the primary connotation of the term "image" was that of a figure or shape, which pertained directly to the body (STI.93.6 obj.3). This suggestion that the locus of the image of God was in the body had very

little support even in the aberrant literature of Christian theology, and Thomas had rejected it earlier in the **Summa** (STI.3.1 ad2). But there was considerable support in Christian literature for the correctness of the pagan insight that the erect posture of the human body was a mark of the special standing of the human species among creatures. In fact, Thomas would not concede that the locus of the image of God, in the precise sense of the word, could be the human body. At most he was willing to grant that the human body, by its figure and shape, "represented" the image of God, which was properly in the soul. This "representing" it did, moreover, "after the fashion of a vestige [per modum vestigii] (STI.93.6 ad3). From his use of this term earlier in this same article it is evident that it implied for him a contrast with "image", so that he could describe the "likeness [similitudo]" of the human mind to God as a likeness "after the fashion of an image" and that of all the other parts of a human being as a likeness "after the fashion of a vestige".

If the image was not to be located in the body of man, then, since Thomas was a dichotomist, it had to be in the soul. In order to articulate his doctrine of the soul as part of the idea of the image of God, Thomas also had to reassert on the unbridgeable ontological difference between the soul and God, as between creature and Creator. Image of God though it was, the soul was not an emanation from God, nor a part of God, but part of "the order of rational creatures, lower than God and higher than the other creatures (STII. 2.19.11). It was, then, the image of God in the soul of man that set him apart from the other terrestrial creatures. The very "being [*esse*]" of man, that which made him human, was to be found in the image, marking the distinction between him and the other animals; but it did so "inasmuch as we possess a mind (STI.93.7 ad1). Thus Thomas could declare: "*Since it is on the basis of his intellectual nature that man is said to be after the image of God, he is after the image of God to the greatest degree at the point at which an intellectual nature is able to imitate God to the greatest degree. Now an intellectual nature imitates God to the greatest degree in asmuch as it imitates this, that God understands and loves Himself*" (STI.93.4 resp.). By way of summary: "*the divine image is perceived in man on the basis of the word conceived out of knowledge of God and of the love that is derived from this* (STI.93.8 resp.).

II

The realization that Thomas' doctrine of the image of God included not only reason, but also a love that transcended reason, indicates that this doctrine was for him not only an element of natural theology, but also a datum of divine revelation.

As a datum of revelation, the doctrine of the image of God was contained in the **Bible** and had been made explicit in the tradition of the Church. Although two passages from the **Psalms** and two passages from the **Prophets** appeared in his examination of the biblical and patristic evidence, Thomas relied chiefly on the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of the image of God in the **Old Testament**, **Genesis 1:26-27**, and on the **New Testament** passages, all of them from the **apostle Paul**, in which this text from the creation story had been given its distinctively Christian interpretation. In the very first article of Question 93, Thomas used the words of **Genesis 1:26**, "*Let us make man after our image and likeness*", as the sed contra on the question, "*Whether there is an image of God in man*" (STI.93.1 s.c.). In article 4, the text from **Genesis**, when quoted as a commentary on itself, enabled Thomas to extract from the creation story what it had not said in so many words, namely, that woman as well as man had been created after the image. For when **Genesis** had said, "*after the image of God He created him*", namely, the human being, it went on to say: "*Male and female He created them*". Taken as a whole, then, the passage meant that "*the image of God is found both in the man and the woman as far as that is concerned in which the concept of the image chiefly consists, namely, the intellectual nature*" (STI.93.4 ad1). A little later, this extension of the image to both male and the female served as a foil for the consideration of the suggestion that the body, not only the mind, was the place of the image, since the difference between male and female was in their bodies (STI.93.6 obj. 2), but this interpretation was rejected with the counter argument that the intent of the words, "Male and female He created them", in the Genesis account was not to involve the physical distinction between the sexes in the definition of the image of God, but on the contrary, to assign the image to the mind, where there was no such distinction because the mind, and therefore the image, was common to both sexes.

The l*ocus classicus* in the first chapter of **Genesis** was likewise the source for the distinction between "image" [imago] and likeness [similitude]. To Thomas, quoting from **Augustine** it seemed evident that some sort of distinction between the two had been intended, since if they were one and the same, one noun could have sufficed. Once they were taken as distinct, the two terms had to be specified in relation to each other. To begin with, Thomas stated, the difference and the reciprocal relation between them in the formula, "*likeness belongs to the definition of image, and image adds something over and above the definition of likeness*" (STI.93.6 resp.). Refining this formula somewhat, he went on to make clear that "not just any likeness", but only "a likeness with respect to species [similitudo]" was necessary for an image (STI.93.2 resp.). The analysis of the interrelation between image and likeness produced a composite term, "likeness of God in the form of an image", which was peculiar to rational creatures and stood in contrast with "likeness in the form of vestige [vestigii]", which could be predicated also of non-rational creatures (STI.93.6 resp). Then in the final article of the question, Thomas contrasted image and likeness as greater length, showing that "likeness" could be seen as prior to "image" in the sense that it acted as its "presupposition" but also as subsequent to "image" as its "expression and perfection" (STI.93.9.resp.). He acknowledged moreover, that in this clarification of biblical terminology he was going beyond ordinary language, where "*likeness is included in the very definition of image*" (Ibid. ad1). In the same article he also cited two other distinctions between image and likeness from the history of Christian thought: the opinion of some theologians that in the spirit , that is , the mind was mad after the image of God, while other parts of man, including even his body, were made after His likeness; and the opinion of **John of Damascus**, and of much of the Greek patristic tradition, that "image" referred to rationality, which remained after the fall of Adam, but that "likeness" referred to the likeness of virtue, which was not fully possible without grace.

Neither the explication of the preposition nor the contrast between "image" and "likeness" represented the most characteristically Western exegesis of **Genesis 1: 26-27**. Ever since Augustine, Latin interpreters had taken these words to mean that the human mind was made after the image of the Trinity. It was, of course, a universal patristic consensus

among both Latins and Greeks that the plural in "Let us make" was a reference to the Trinity, but **Alfred Schindler** has recently pointed out again *"that among Greek Christian writers there is no model for the trinitarian analogies of Augustine to be found*" (Schindler, 1965). Therefore when Thomas came to the question whether the image was the image of God in man was the image the image of persons of the Trinity, he quoted two Greek Church Fathers who appeared to be teaching that the image was the image of divine essence rather than that of the Trinity: **John of Damascus** and **Gregory of Nyssa.**

Of the several passages from the **Pauline epistles** cited in Thomas' examination of the image of God, two referred to the Son as image and directly connected that reference to the creation and salvation of man in the image; both of them were quoted in objections and then dealt with in responses. One was **Romans 8:29**, which read in the Latin, as it does in the Greek and in the English, "*Those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son*", but which for some reason Thomas quoted in a different form: "*Those whom he foreknew to be conformed to the image of his Son, these he predestined*". This appeared to exclude those who had not been conformed and predestined to the image of the Son from the image of God altogether (STI.93.4 obj. 2). The other passage was **Colossians 1:15**, where the Son of God was called "*the image of the invisible God, the first- born of all creation*". If this assignment of the image were to be taken in an exclusive sense, it would preclude an image of God in anyone except the Son (STI.93.1 obj. 2). Committed though he was to the Augustinian view that the soul of man bore the image of God the Trinity, Thomas was also intent on being faithful to biblical language and doctrine. The Pauline doctrine of the Son of God as the image of God made a signal contribution to Thomas' doctrine of creation- not only the creation of man after the image of God, but the creation of all things. In the rather unlikely context of the doctrine of the beatific vision, Thomas described it as including the vision of all temporal creatures "in God himself". The ontological ground for such a comprehensive doctrine of the vision of God was supplied by the thesis: "*In the uncreated Word are the ideas [rationes] of all creatures*" (STI.93.8 ad4). In an earlier question (STI.15.3 s.c.) he had defined ideas, on the basis of Augustine, as "*exemplars existing in the divine mind*", and, on the basis of Plato, as "the principles of the knowledge of things

and of their generation (Ibid. resp.). Here he carried the doctrine of ideas an important step further by locating them in the eternal reality of the Logos, the image of the Father.

The most substantive contribution of the christological definition of the image To Thomas' doctrine of man as created after the image of God came by way of the contrast between the perfect and the imperfect image. In a passage to which we have referred earlier, Thomas argued on the basis of the consistent pattern of biblical language that the Son of God was always called "the image" and was never said to be "after the image". Strictly speaking, only the Son could be called "the image", because only he had an "identity of nature" with God and therefore formed a perfect image of the Father. When man was called "image" and not merely "after the image", this did not simply a perfect image but only an authentic likeness, yet one that was present in "an alien nature" (STI.93.1 ad2). The same distinction served as a key to the words of **Hilary,** defining an identity of "species" as essential to a true image; Thomas quoted these words twice in this question and also in the discussion of the Son as 'image" in Question 35 (obj.2). Thomas was able to explain Hilary's insistence on an identity of "species" as a reference to "the idea of the perfect image", by which the Son of God did have such an identity with the Father, rather than as a reference to the "imperfect image" present in man, who was not identical in "species" with that of which he was the image. This basic contrast between the perfect image in the Son and the imperfect image in the creature must not, however, be permitted to obscure that validity of the doctrine of creation after the image of God. Indeed, even in the case of the non-rational creatures one had to insist that "everything that is imperfect is [nevertheless] some sort of participation in that which is perfect (STI.93.2 ad1). This insistence applied a fortiori to rational creatures, made after the image of God in the distinctive sense taught by Scripture. Thus Christ, the revelation of God to man, was also the revelation of man to man, showing in hih divine and human natures what it meant to be the image of God.

Although we have distinguished the image of God as an element of natural theology from the image of God as a datum of divine revelation, Thomas himself did not divide his presentation according to this Schema.

But he did divide his larger work this way, and it would appear to be faithful to his intention to look at his doctrine of the image first according to nature and then according to grace. Otherwise one or the other aspect of the doctrine would suffer, and this means, according to his fundamental theological stance, that both aspects would suffer. Only if man, created after the image of God, manifested that image, even though only in vestiges after the fall, could the fullness of the image be recognized as standing in continuity with his humanity; and, conversely, it was only the revelation of the Trinity, as believed and confessed by the Church, that provided the authentic content and deeper meaning of the creation after the image of God, seen and known by natural knowledge. For in the doctrine as such and in the doctrine of creation as such, we can see the working of the fundamental axiom enunciated in the very first question of the **Summa Theologiae**: "*Grace does not do away with nature, but brings it to perfection*" (STI.1.8 ad2).

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