

The Only Way

Answering the argument that all religions are more or less true.

By Daniel B. Clendenin

"Will my mother be in heaven?" ten-year-old Lexi asked her adoptive parents. Lexi wanted to know whether her birth mother, who was from India and had died without ever having heard the gospel, would be saved. Lexi had an obvious personal reason for asking this question, but it is one that most Christians encounter at some point: Can anyone be saved who has not heard and accepted the gospel?

Recently I attended a meeting at my son's middle school where parents were introduced to sex-education materials for our children. There are students in this school from over 30 countries, composing a mosaic of the world's religions. It occurred to me that most of those people from other religions who sat beside me that night maintain high sexual standards that are far closer to my own views than are those of the "average" secular American. I felt strangely positive about and even grateful for the presence of believers of other faiths in my community.

These two encounters with other religions pose two different challenges--one theological, the other political. Lexi's question poses the issue of theological pluralism and is religious in nature: Is there truth in other religions? Can an adherent of a non-Christian religion be saved? Lexi's question is foreboding, for the very heart of the gospel is at stake in how we answer.

The other challenge of world religions is cultural pluralism, and the issues raised are political: How can people of widely divergent faiths live peacefully together in society? My sex-education experience filled me with gratitude about the presence of non-Christian, religious allies on a crucial moral issue.

How do we sort out these questions?

MANY GODS, MANY LORDS

A smorgasbord of religions is not new. It is precisely what we find in Scripture. The radical monotheism of Israel (Deut. 4:35) developed amidst Egyptian polytheism. Who could forget Elijah's fiery encounter on Mount Carmel with Jezebel's prophets of Baal and Asherah to determine the one true God (1 Kings 18:17-40)?

In the New Testament era, Paul proclaimed that Christ alone provided the only true gospel (Gal. 1:6-9); he alone was the only worthy Lord among the "many 'gods' and many 'lords' " (1 Cor. 8:5, NIV) of Greek and Roman polytheism. At Ephesus, home to the cult of the goddess Diana, Paul provoked a riot when he declared that " 'gods made with human hands are not gods' " (Acts 19:23-26, NRSV).

Yet, while the idea of a cornucopia of human religiosity is very old, our awareness of its challenge to Christian faith is rather new. We are in a fundamentally different religious environment from what our grandparents or even our parents encountered. We can no longer think and speak in terms confined to Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish categories. The world we live in has changed.

One reason is immigration. In 1994 there were about 22.5 million foreign-born people in America. In my home state of California, for example, one-quarter of our residents are foreign-born. My son's middle-school teacher had 11 nationalities in a class of 30 students. While America has always been a nation of immigrants, what is new is where today's immigrants come from. More and more they come from culturally non-Christian nations, and they bring with them the religions of the world. Our nation is becoming less and less a religiously homogeneous country. Islam will replace Judaism as America's second-largest religion in about 20 years; already 3 to 5 million Buddhists live in America; and Hindu temples dot the landscapes not only of Chicago and New York, but also of Aurora, Illinois, and Springfield, Virginia.

Living in religious isolation is almost impossible. Most people can name colleagues they work with every day who are of other religions. Through this interaction we discover that people of other faiths are very much like us. They laugh at weddings and cry at funerals, are as moral as we are, and carry the same hopes, fears, and dreams as we do.

The evangelistic efforts of some world religions have also heightened their visibility. Who has not been approached by a Hare Krishna devotee passing out literature in an airport? At a Stanford University meeting of campus ministers, we were asked to identify our intended audience and scope of activity--to which a Muslim campus minister responded with a bashful chuckle, "the entire world."

Over the last hundred years, many departments of theology and philosophy have encouraged nonjudgmental attitudes toward other religions, precluding the judgment that one faith is superior to another. Some people now insist that "right action" (ethics) is the criterion of "true religion," whereas "right doctrine" (orthodoxy) is divisive. And so adherents of other religions are viewed as potential partners in actions of ethical goodwill rather than as lost people who need to be saved.

Radical relativity has invaded our cultural consciousness. Any absolute claim is disdained as idolatrous, illusory, and bigoted. Choice in and of itself is

deemed good, and the only choice that cannot be tolerated is one like ours: namely, that some beliefs are true and good while others are false and wrong.

Pressure to rethink the relationship between Christianity and the world religions poses some very painful questions. A main one is the suspicion that one's religious identity is really an accident of geography, so that people of Kuwait are primarily Muslim, those in Japan Shinto, people in India Hindu, and so on. Are we not Christians simply because we were born and raised in America where, until recently, the Christian faith has dominated?

The vast majority of people who have ever lived and are living today are not Christian. Does it make sense, therefore, to believe that God wants to save people only through Christ? Exact figures are hard to come by, but even rough estimates are disturbing. In A.D. 100, about a half percent of the world population was Christian, in A.D. 1000 about 19 percent, and today--after 2,000 years of missionary effort--only about 30 percent of the world identifies itself as Christian. What can we say about the eternal destiny of this vast horde who never named the name of Christ?

Taken together, these factors help to explain our new awareness of a very old challenge: The vast diversity of world religions pose competing claims and offer "gospels" other than that of Christ alone as Savior and Lord.

BEDROCK TRUTHS

With this pluralistic, religious context in mind, we can begin to craft a Christian response to the world religions by reminding ourselves of five important truths. However we respond to Lexi's question and my public school experience, we must hold fast to these clear truths of Scripture:

First, all God's work is perfect, void of even the faintest tinge of unfairness (Deut. 32:4; Zeph. 3:5). Christians can be absolutely confident about the character of God when we deal with the problem of religions. While denying that all religions are equally valid or that all people will be saved, we remain utterly confident that God will treat every person with perfect love and justice. Elihu stated this most eloquently: "Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong" (Job 34:10, NIV). For the Christian, it is unthinkable that God will treat any person of any time, place, or religion unfairly. So to Abraham's ancient question, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25, NIV), Christians respond with a resounding yes!

Second, Jesus Christ is the definitive and fullest revelation of God. All three major branches of Christianity--Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant--affirm, in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 374), that Jesus Christ was "the only-begotten Son of God,

begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made." Our doctrine of natural or general revelation allows us to affirm that God has partially revealed himself in creation, in conscience--and perhaps even in some non-Christian religions. Yet, God has fully and most definitively revealed himself in Christ, who alone will judge all other claims of revelation.

Third, there is no other means to salvation apart from what God provided through Christ's vicarious and sacrificial death on the cross. As evangelicals we remain committed to the necessary and all-sufficient atoning work of Christ on the cross. This is unquestioned. What is debated among some Christians, including evangelicals, is whether Christ's atoning work of salvation can be efficacious for people who have not known and accepted this provision of salvation, such as people who lived before Christ, infants who die, mentally challenged people who do not have the intellectual capacity to understand the gospel, and people who have no opportunity to hear the gospel. More on this later.

Fourth, whereas God is infinite and beyond comprehension, we humans are finite and sinful, often far too quick, theologically speaking, to speak of things we don't understand (Job 42:3). We need to cultivate a measure of theological humility. Humility is not skepticism, agnosticism, or even the refusal to argue for a bold position. Rather, it is the recognition that "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9, NIV). Paul was reduced to doxological humility when he marveled at "how unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33, NRSV). It is natural and even good to long for definitive answers to life's most difficult questions, but some of our questions will go unanswered--at least in this life.

Only about 30 percent of the world is Christian. What can we say about the eternal destiny of this vast horde who never named the name of Christ?

Even our reading of Scripture gives us cause for theological humility. Evangelicals rightly insist that Scripture is God's normative self-revelation, but this does not mean that it answers every question we have. The Westminster Confession (I.7) observes that not all things in Scripture are equally clear, nor equally clear to all believers. But through the "due use of ordinary means" (study, prayer, the counsel of others, etc.) we can attain a sufficient if not perfect understanding of all that is necessary for salvation. Although it is sometimes frustrating, we need to remind ourselves that while the Scriptures are infallible, our understanding of them is not,

and that a high view of inspiration does not automatically lead to accurate interpretation. Hence, there is reason enough for theological modesty, especially about a matter as nettlesome as the relationship between Christianity and the world religions.

Fifth and finally, we remain under the mandate of the Great Commission to make disciples among every people and nation. Christ himself issued this command four different times (Matt. 28:19-20; Luke 24:45-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). Evangelicals must guard against any loss of nerve in proclaiming unapologetically the truth of the gospel. Thus, to confidence about the character of God, the fullness of God's self-revelation in Christ, the sufficiency of Christ's atonement for humanity's sin, and theological humility about what we do not or cannot know, we add the criterion of practical obedience to what we do know--the evangelistic imperative.

How should Christians respond to the world religions? These five affirmations should help us steer a path between saying too much, which could lead to a needlessly harsh position that drives people into radically pluralistic viewpoints, and saying too little, which could lead to denying the uniqueness and normativeness of the gospel.

THE PLURALITIES OF PLURALISM

The term *pluralism* can function in a variety of ways, and it is important to keep them straight. At one level, *pluralism* can describe simple demographic facts, the way things are. In this sense, Stanford University is "pluralistic" since there are 24 religious groups on campus that work under the auspices of the university's Memorial Church. Or again, Singapore is "pluralistic" since it is roughly 41 percent Buddhist, 18 percent Christian, 17 percent Muslim, 17 percent secularist, and 5 percent Hindu. It is a demographic fact that the United States, once a religiously homogeneous country, is rapidly becoming more "pluralistic." This is simply the way things are.

There are two other meanings of *pluralism* that have to do with world-views. One of these is theological pluralism, the belief that all religions are more or less able to provide salvation. This is theologically destructive and needs to be refuted.

The other is the belief that political or cultural pluralism (social diversity) is an ideal. I considered my school experience of cultural pluralism as socially positive, good, and to be promoted.

Learning to distinguish between theological and cultural pluralism is essential to developing a Christian view of other religions. All too often we merge and confuse the two. An excellent example of this comes from the Hindu Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a prominent participant at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, who proclaimed that he was "proud to belong to a religion that has taught the world both tolerance and universal

acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions to be true." Promoting political toleration and universal suffrage for people of any and all religion is one thing, even a good thing; but believing that all religions are true and lead equally to salvation is quite another matter.

Now we are ready to return to Lexi's question. To answer her we need to hold two biblical principles together: one, God desires that no one should perish, but rather that every person be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9); and two, Christ alone is the only way to the Father, the only name under heaven by which we can be saved (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

So are all people not of the Christian faith eternally lost? Here we seem betwixt and between. To answer yes, when roughly 70 percent of today's world population is non-Christian, seems to cast a dark shadow of doubt over the first truth. To answer no apparently contradicts the equally clear truth of the second point and cuts the nerve of the missionary imperative to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20).

Three centuries ago John Bunyan (1628-88) admitted in his classic autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, that the Devil assailed him with questions like these:

How can you tell but that the Turks had as good Scriptures to prove their Mahomet the Saviour, as we have to prove our Jesus is; and could I think that so many ten thousands in so many Countreys and Kingdoms, should be without the knowledge of the right way to Heaven . . . and that we onely, who live but in a corner of the earth, should alone be blessed therewith? Everyone doth think his own Religion rightest, both Jews, and Moors, and Pagans; and how if all our Faith, and Christ, and Scriptures, should be but a think-so too?

Bunyan's language may sound quaint, and Lexi's question to her parents full of childlike innocence, but the force of their perplexities hits us like a karate chop to the back of our theological necks. How should evangelicals who believe that Christ alone is the only way to God respond to the wildly divergent truth claims of the world religions?

In general, Christians have adopted one of three basic paradigms to answer this question, which I will call pluralism, exclusivism, and inclusivism.

THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM

For two hundred years, Christians have defended their world-view against the attacks of atheism that argued all religions are false. How ironic that we now face the opposite extreme, a theological pluralism that claims all

religions are true. Theological pluralism is not entirely new, nor is it a single position, although it has been vigorously championed in the last decade by a growing number of prominent scholars. The pluralist agenda has been set by Paul Knitter's landmark volume *No Other Name?* (1985) and a book edited by Knitter and philosopher of religion John Hick entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1988). Their goal was a radical reconception of traditional Christian beliefs, and in this they more than succeeded.

Despite important differences among its various advocates, theological pluralism entails both a positive and a negative judgment. Negatively, pluralists categorically repudiate the traditional Christian position that Christ is the only way to the Father; they view this as outrageously absurd, chauvinistic, and as morally, politically, and theologically disastrous. According to Hick, "only diehards who are blinded by dogmatic spectacles can persist in such a sublime bigotry." Thus, pluralists sharply reject the idea that any one religion is absolute or normative.

Positively, whereas atheism declares that all religion is false, the pluralist affirms them all as true. The many world religions are all limited but valid human apprehensions of the one, true, infinite Divine Reality. Hick often summarizes his position by quoting the *Bhagavad Gita* (4.11): "Howsoever men may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine." In other words, the one Divine Reality has many different names.

According to the theological pluralists, people may be savingly related to God through any number of vastly different religions because God is actively revealed more or less equally through all of them. Behind all the wildly divergent human religions, there is some basic, shared core, a universal essence or common denominator that allows us to say that they are all really the same or aiming at the same goal.

Despite the current prestige of theological pluralism, and even its apparent appeal--who would not want to affirm that all religions are equal?--this paradigm contains significant flaws.

First, we have all heard the cliché that "all religions teach the same thing." Is that true? At a superficial level we might answer yes. It would be easy, for example, to document versions of the Golden Rule in a number of otherwise very different religions. But at a deeper level, a universal essence or common denominator is precisely what the world religions do not have. Once we move beyond superficial similarities, we discover that the many religions of the world present to us very different and sometimes contradictory pictures of God and the world.

In his excellent book *Dissonant Voices*, evangelical philosopher Harold Netland compares the way Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Shinto answer three basic questions:

the nature of the religious ultimate, the human predicament, and salvation. What we discover, of course, is that these religions offer radically different perspectives on these basic questions. For example, Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, confesses one creator God as ultimate, whereas a number of different concepts within Buddhism make it hard to locate a single idea for the ultimate. Or again, Shinto is polytheistic whereas Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are monotheistic. To take one more example, in Hinduism and Buddhism the fundamental human problem is not sin against a righteous God, but "rather a profound ignorance, blindness, or confusion regarding the true nature of reality." With differing conceptions of the human predicament, then, the world religions propose differing concepts of "salvation."

Furthermore, to insist that the world religions all make essentially similar claims distorts what they actually do teach and is blatantly patronizing. Imagine how a Muslim or Hindu feels when she is told that the central affirmations of her religion are no different from those of a Christian or Buddhist. As Netland writes, "So long as the meanings of the doctrines within the respective religious communities are preserved, they cannot be jointly accepted without absurdity."

Second, according to the religious pluralists, god or the "Ultimate Real" is in itself unknown and unknowable. All that we do know are the very human and relative religious expressions of this Real, which are accepted as equally valid. Says Hick, the Real remains "forever hidden, beyond the scope of human conception, language, or worship." The world religions then speak symbolically and mythically about the Real, but not literally. But if this is so, why are the pluralists so confident about their own pronouncements about religion? By their own standard, these too are merely relative descriptions of the Unknowable, but in fact, they propose to inform us about the way things "really" are. If the Real is unknown and unknowable, why argue that all the religions are more or less true? Why not argue that they are all false? Or again, why does the pluralist argue that there is only one Ultimate Real? Why not many? In short, in theological pluralism the Real has become an empty referent that has no clearly assignable content, and it is self-contradictory to claim that its own religious world-view is not a contradiction.

Finally, while with atheism it is impossible for a religionist to be right, with theological pluralism it is apparently impossible to be wrong. If the pluralist is correct that all the religions are more or less equally true, then it is impossible to make a mistake, either morally or cognitively. But do we really want to say this? What about the Christian Crusades, Hindu widow burning, female genital mutilation, temple prostitution, or Aztec human sacrifice? Are these religious expressions really as valid as Islamic almsgiving or Buddhist self-denial? Do we not

want to distinguish between a religion whose symbol is a stone phallus and a religion whose symbol is a cross?

It seems clear that some religious practices and beliefs are false and evil. But this is precisely what the pluralist cannot say and remain consistent. Without some absolute standard by which to judge, it becomes impossible to say that Mother Teresa's Sisters of Mercy are any better than the Heaven's Gate cult; or that David Koresh's compound at Waco, Texas, was any worse than an Amish community. Simply put, consistent pluralism tolerates the intolerable.

THEOLOGICAL EXCLUSIVISM AND INCLUSIVISM

Evangelicals rightly reject the theological pluralism of Knitter, Hick, and others, while continuing to explore the adequacy of two other theological models of relating to the world religions: exclusivism and inclusivism. Both have their strengths and weaknesses, and both have their advocates within evangelicalism.

Exclusivism has been the historic position of much of the church, and for that reason alone it merits our deepest respect. In its simplest form, exclusivism is a logical claim: When two religions make logically incompatible truth claims, they cannot both be true. For example, some Eastern religions hold that life and death are an endless, recurring cycle, whereas Christians believe that after death comes judgment. To be sure, when we die, one of these views will be proved false. Thus we see how silly it is to claim that "all religions are equally true."

We need to hold two biblical principles together: one, God desires that every person be saved; and two, Christ alone is the only way to be saved.

More important, exclusivism is a theological claim that, in order to be saved, people must intentionally place their faith in Christ alone as the only way to God. Indeed, if Jesus is truly God incarnate, then some form of exclusivism is necessary. Christian exclusivism need not claim that all the beliefs of other religions are false or have no value. We can affirm that non-Christian religions contain some truth. Non-Christian beliefs are rejected only when they contradict clear Christian teaching. Exclusivism finds expression in the classic statements of Origen (c. 185-254) and Cyprian (c. 200-58) that "outside the church there is no salvation." In its purest form, an exclusivist would argue that there are no exceptions to the rule that salvation requires an explicit acceptance of Christ's redemptive work through faith. Evangelicals who tend toward a "hard" exclusivist position include Harold Netland (*Dissonant Voices*) and D. A. Carson (*The Gagging of God*).

Many Christians, including some exclusivists, want to make at least some exceptions. It seems likely that some people have been saved exclusively by Christ even though they have not explicitly called upon Christ--for instance, Old Testament saints, infants who die young, and the severely mentally challenged. By analogy, some would add a fourth category of possible exceptions, some people of other religions. This is the inclusivist position.

C. S. Lewis illustrates inclusivism in *Mere Christianity* when he writes, "We do know that no person can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved by Him." In his final Narnia classic, *The Last Battle*, despite having followed the false god Tash, the pagan Emeth (whose name is the Hebrew word for "truth") is welcomed into the kingdom of Aslan. So in inclusivism, salvation is exclusively by Christ alone and not good works, even though a person has not explicitly called upon Christ. Evangelical inclusivists today include Clark Pinnock (*A Wideness in God's Mercy*) and John Sanders (*No Other Name*).

Certainly caution is in order here. We must not assume that God has put us in a position to answer questions beyond the scope of our own personal sphere of obedient responsibility: that is, the fate of those who through no fault of their own do not hear the gospel or because we Christians through no fault of our own were unable to take it to them. J. I. Packer says that "we have no warrant to expect that God will act thus in any single case where the gospel is not known or understood. Therefore our missionary obligation is not one whit diminished by our entertaining this possibility." We do better to redouble our efforts to obey what we do know is clear--the Great Commission--rather than to speculate or worry about what is unclear.

THE CHARGE OF INTOLERANCE--NOT GUILTY

Oddly enough, the theological affirmation that Christ alone is the only way to salvation brings us to the question of cultural pluralism, which was illustrated by my sex-education experience. There is a clear link between the two. Theological pluralists like Hick and Knitter accuse traditional Christians of bigotry and arrogance when we proclaim the exclusivist gospel in the public square. They maintain it is wrong to proselytize and to try to convert people of other religions to Christianity. How should Christians respond to charges of intolerance toward other religions?

One way to address these concerns, as Netland has shown, is to distinguish between several related but different types of *toleration*. First, there is *legal* toleration, a tradition championed in the West and painfully absent in many other parts of the world. Legal toleration refers to what we call our First Amendment rights--freedom of speech and press, freedom of and even from religion without compulsion or government interference, protection

of minority opinion and dissent, and so on. *Social* toleration refers to the promotion of attitudes of respect, esteem, humility, modesty, and the like. Christians should always be in the forefront of promoting and protecting both legal and social toleration for all people, regardless of their religious beliefs. This is simply a human right that we all cherish.

Another level of toleration is *intellectual*, which is the relativist belief that we should accept whatever another person sincerely believes as "true for them." Legal toleration commits us always to protect people's political rights to follow any religion or no religion at all; and social toleration advocates charity toward people who think and believe differently from the way we do; but this does not necessarily commit us to intellectual toleration if that means we should never conclude that a person holds to false ideas and, consequently, try to convince them that they are wrong and should change their views. Vigorous debate can occur in a civil and charitable manner.

The current cultural climate often fails to distinguish legal and social toleration from intellectual toleration so that if you criticize a person's ideas you are charged with bigotry and intolerance toward that person. Proselytizing becomes the worst social sin imaginable. Because of this current climate, evangelicals need to give renewed vigor and attention to promoting cultural pluralism, which encourages the legal and social toleration of a multiplicity of religious voices while vigorously rejecting theological pluralism, which practices intellectual toleration in its claim that salvation is equally accessible through all religions. In other words, we can love those we disagree with (by practicing legal and social toleration) while trying to convince them that they are wrong.

So are we being hypocritical by wanting to protect and promote the rights of people of other faiths while, at the same time, declaring them to be wrong and in need of conversion? No. There are at least three reasons for such a stance.

First is the recognition that legal toleration is just that, the law of the land, and for this we should be thankful. The alternative is some form of totalitarianism. In this sense, all American citizens should enjoy an equal protection of First Amendment rights. Christians should not expect any privileged status. For example, legally mandating a specifically Christian prayer in public schools is not a good idea, whereas supporting the right of an atheist against religious repression is a good idea.

Second, as my sex-education experience indicated, even when we disagree with people theologically, there are often practical reasons to join with them in a moral alliance to resist evil trends in culture.

Third, a Christian anthropology affirms that God has given all people rational minds and free wills that even God honors. Practically speaking, as John Stuart Mill

noted in his classic text *On Liberty* (1859), it is virtually impossible to use any sort of outward force to compel inward conviction. In fact, using compulsion often backfires. Rather, with Paul, we seek to woo people, with all of our passion and persuasion, but never by manipulation or force.

WHY WE WITNESS

Christians should champion political or cultural pluralism but categorically reject theological pluralism in favor of the exclusive work of Christ. Thus, to the other parents of children in my son's seventh grade, I extend grateful partnership for our shared moral concerns, a promise always to honor them with the civil grace that we all cherish, but also the promise of a vigorous discussion about the most important question anyone can ever ask-- what must I do to be saved? (Acts 16:30).

To Lexi's question about whether her birth mother would be in heaven, I'd respond with an honest "It's possible" or better, "I don't know." But why then witness to her mother if she might be saved by Christ without calling upon Christ? As Packer suggests, it is impossible for us to know how God is dealing with any given individual who does not know or understand the gospel. The ordinary way of salvation entails an explicit act of faith in Christ, and any exceptions to this are best understood as extraordinary. To be saved, as it were, "by the skin of your teeth" is one thing; but to experience "abundant life" in Christ (John 10:10) in all its fullness requires an explicit knowledge and experience of the gospel in all its depth and breadth. The latter is the better and more sure way to heaven and the one we attach our labors to.

Finally, we witness because we must exercise practical obedience to what God has clearly commanded, even if we do not understand everything. Rather than some flimsy excuse that results in evangelistic timidity, here our theological humility results in a doxological response to God whose ways are sometimes unreachable (Rom. 11:33-36) but in whom we can certainly trust.

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