

## **Critical Role and Place of the Church as a Response to Environmental Crisis**

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### **Abstract**

Globally, the preservation of environment is very foundational as far as the realization of the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) is concerned today. There was a time when people in poorer countries thought that the environmental crisis was not a serious problem for us in developing countries. Our problem, it was assumed, was poverty and economic exploitation; the environmental issue was a “luxury” of the industrialized countries (Abraham, 1995). But today we realize how urgent this issue is for the whole world. Therefore by preserving environment it would be part of an indicator of being the light and salt of the world (Matt.5:13) while responding to the environmental crisis. However, environment continues to be badly damaged and threatened by human activities. And, despite of the attempts by various local and international organizations, state and other agencies to protect the environment (Sowunmi, 1994), the scriptural contribution has often been overlooked and at the same time many Christians have become insensitive about it as far as responding to the environmental crisis is concerned. This article therefore has the following pertinent questions to address: how significant and central are scriptures (bible) towards the promotion of environmental preservation? What are critical implications of those teachings for the church today? Regarding the methodology of obtaining the data, since this is a bible-centred article the scriptures and other extra-biblical sources in relation to environmental crisis will be critically analyzed. Thus this article is to critically examine the place and role of the church based on scriptures and other related religious teachings towards environmental preservation. Implications and recommendations for a contemporary Christian will follow suit.

**Key Words:** Environmental Crisis, Ecology, Church

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### **Introduction**

This is not a science but a bible-based article aimed at analyzing the church's response to environmental crisis through scriptures. It will expound on the central concepts of this article namely environment and environmental crisis. An analysis of scriptures and other extra-biblical sources will be made about their richness and relevance on environment issues for a twentieth century Christian. This will be followed by relevant implications and the urgency to apply scriptures.

### **Background**

Hallman (1994) notes that the earth is precious: to God and to us by explaining to us of the beauty of the earth using the words of an anonymous lover of the earth with this contemplation:

If the earth were only a few feet in diameter, floating a few feet above a field somewhere, people would come from everywhere to marvel at it. People would walk come from everywhere to marvel at it. People would walk around it, marveling at its big pools of water, its little pools and the water flowing between the pools. People would marvel at the bumps on it, and the holes in it, and they would marvel at the very thin layer of gas surrounding it and the water suspended in the gas. The people would marvel at all the creatures walking around the surface of the ball, and at the creatures in the water. The people would declare it precious because it was the only one, and they would protect it so that it would not be hurt. The ball would be the greatest wonder known, and people would come to behold of it, to be healed, to gain knowledge, to know beauty and to wonder how it could be. People would love it, and defend it with their lives, because they would somehow know that their lives, their own roundness, could be nothing without it.

Therefore, from the above quotation, it implies that the earth may not be slighted, abused, wasted, conquered, plundered, privatized or destroyed. It deserves to be treated with reverence and tenderness. It has to be bequeathed healthy and whole and beautiful to generations to come.

### **The concept of environment and environmental ethics**

Morrison (1999) notes that the word environment is used in the physical sense referring to the living and non-living things that we find around us: water, trees, minerals, plants, animals, marine resources, space air and homes all are parts of our environment. It is also the sum total of all the living and non-living elements and their effects that influence human life. While all living or biotic elements are animals, plants, forests, fisheries and birds, non-living or abiotic elements include water, land, sunlight, rocks and air. ([byjus.com/commerce/meaning-and-functions-of-environment](http://byjus.com/commerce/meaning-and-functions-of-environment)). However, for environmental crisis, Park (2012), states that it is a term used to describe the sum of the environmental problems that we face today that include the greenhouse effect and global warming, the hole in the ozone layer, acid

rain, and tropical forest clearance. And, the causes and solutions lie much more in the people's attitudes, values and expectations. Anyam (2011) argues that environment is all that ensures the survival of life both internal, physical, biological, chemical, and socio-economic dimensions of human and non-human organisms. That is; internal environment is sustained by the external one for instance a fish in water may not survive if water (external environment) is tampered with. There are many different kinds of environments on earth, but essentially, we all rely on the planet for our survival. Morrison (1999) analyzes that when we damage the environment, we threaten our own survival and that of our children. It is furthermore observed that we need to protect the environment because the earth's population is growing annually, with Africa having one of the quickest rates of increase. This means that each year there are more and more people who have to be fed, employed and housed-all of which require us to use more and more of the earth's limited resources. It is also noted that some environmental problems like erosion, desertification and deforestation can be directly linked to increasing populations and other factors as reported by The World watch Institute (2017) in its final reports:

As the twenty-first century begins, several well-established environmental trends are shaping the future civilization. This includes population growth, rising temperature, falling water tables, shrinking cropland per person, collapsing fisheries, shrinking forests and loss of plant and animal species.

It is also realized that all people need to eat and then more and more land is used to grow crops (Morrison, 1999) but eventually environmental effects take place. In short, it is noted that human beings and their actions are very central. Environment has many functions and sustains life and it therefore enhances the quality of life. This calls us to preserve it both for now and for the future generations. The church has a great role to contribute which this article will discuss.

Elsewhere, Anyam (2011) argues that man's domineering power over the environment has created both negative and positive impacts. It is thus noted that human actions have impacted more negatively on the environment without respecting the boundaries and borders globally. Examples out of such an impact include how pesticides, contamination of water and pollution of air have had a negative impact on humanity and environment across borders and boundaries. In addition, Harrison (2007) argues that the environmental problem has affected natural habitats of some species like animals to heat and death. Also micro- organisms have been rendered susceptible to dangerous exposure implying that the environment is under-siege. Giving examples in Africa, Femi (2007) mentions of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where the economic activities of oil and gas exploration have given rise to environmental pollution through the emission of air pollutants, greenhouse gases, carbon monoxide which contribute to environmental problems both locally and globally. Apart from a few examples of the effects of the abuse of environment, Pollard in Velaquez (2003) despairs of our being able to deal adequately with these problems:

My own view is that (mankind) will not do so until he has suffered greatly and much that he now relies upon has been destroyed. As the earth is in a short few decades becomes twice as crowded with human beings as it is now, and as human societies are confronted with dwelling resources in the midst of mounting accumulations of wastes, and a steadily deteriorating environment, we can only foresee social paroxysms of an intensity greater than any we have

so far known. The problems are so varied and so vast and the means for their solutions so far beyond the resources of the scientific and technological know-how on which we have relied that there simply is no time to avoid impending catastrophe. We stand therefore, on the threshold of a time of judgment more severe, undoubtedly, than any mankind has ever faced before in history.

With such skepticism as noted from above, it is of wonder whether there is a remedy for environmental problems. However, human beings are able to work against much of the environmental destruction as long they have the will supported by respective institutions like the state. Therefore, after such a despair one wonders whether the scriptures have any guidance and suggested solutions for those affected by environmental destruction. Do they have any remedy?

### **Scriptures and Environment**

From the beginning, the Bible says “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it* (Gen.2:15). To *work it and keep it* meant that human beings were to maintain and preserve creation but not to destroy it. It was to be preserved for the good of the generations to come. Genesis 1:28 also reminds us that human beings were given the mandate to have dominion over creation: “*God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”* Destruction is not part of the story! Instead God’s stewardship is at the centre of this Genesis story. Hallman (1994) while discussing environment concentrates on Psalm 24. The central point is that the earth is the Lord’s. Everything that the earth contains belongs to the Lord: its fullness and all its rich resources. This faith confession recurs throughout the bible (cf. Ex. 9:29, 19:5. Lev. 25:23; Deut.10:14; 1 Sam.2:8; Pss.2:8; 8:69; 47:8;66:6-14;50:10-12; 89:12; 95:4-5; Acts 14:15; 17:24-26)

Avila (1983) while presenting the stand taken by many early Christian thinkers, pointed out that

Private ownership which excludes others, concentration of land and accumulation of wealth which leaves others dispossessed and impoverished involves fraud, robbery, plunder and radical injustice. In the midst of the poor and wealthy, are thieves. Inheritance is accumulation and transmission of stolen goods. Their restoration to the community is demand of justice. What the fathers condemn is the institution of private ownership and not merely its abuse. They identify all private property with avarice, violence, deprivation, and thievery. According to them, private property is the root cause of discords, conflicts and wars. It is not God’s property, but human law, the law of the emperor; it contradicts the purpose of God written into the fabric of the earth.

However, this was the stand of the ancient Christian thinkers but the main point raised here is to promote justice. The effect of such forms bad leaders contribute to the abuse of the environment since poverty is one of the prominent ones.

The Word of God further is a goldmine of wisdom and knowledge, environmental issues inclusive. In Genesis 2:15 *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.* God took the initiative to provide for human beings to work and improve on the already created garden. He gave man the best place. Taking care of

it implied they needed to keep the creation of God in an appropriate way but not destroying it; they needed to preserve creation. God provides but he holds us responsible for maintaining what he has provided. This principle applies to us today as it applied to Adam. It is not enough to be blessed with land but we must maintain and preserve it. Thus destruction of environment like soil erosion, deforestation and use of chemicals that are harmful to the soil (Ayademo, 2006). However, not all chemicals are enemies to our environment. The bad ones should not be used since they destroy good soils among others.

We need to underline that “all that there is”, comes from God (Gen.1) and that he made it for himself (Col.1:6). The entire creation belongs to God who entrusted all of this to man as His vice-regent, gave to man some strange thing called “rule” of dominion over everything in the earth, instructing man to ‘fill the earth, and subdue it’ (Ps 24:1; 8:3-8; Gen 1:26-30) as noted by Beisner in Clark & Rakestraw, 1994). That is; the implication of such texts like Psalm 24:1 calls us to see God as the owner and source of all creation. God is our land lord and we are his tenants. We don’t own anything. It belongs to the real Owner namely God. It calls for total dependence on him since human beings as mere stewards.

Therefore whatever that we do with creation should be God-centred (theocentric). Grudem and Asmus (2013) stress that though human beings have dominion over creation, they should preserve and make use of it wisely; which unfortunately is not always followed. The same creator rejoices in its beauty (creation) in the same way that an artist rejoices over a finished masterpiece (Gen.1:31; Ps 104:31; Matt 6:28-30). It is through creation of God that all the needs of humanity including our material needs for food, shelter, medicine and clothing are fulfilled (Gen 1:29-39; 3:7, 21).

### **The Analysis of the extra –biblical literature on environmental crisis with implications**

The dominion mandate is also raised by Grudem & Asmus (2013) where God put human beings on the earth with the intention that they would develop it and make its resources useful. Here, the idea of ‘usefulness sets in’ and it is this ‘usefulness’ of the resources that is the crux of the matter at hand. To what extent are human beings fulfilling this mandate? However, in his remarks, Velasquez, 2002) notes that modern industry has provided us with a material prosperity unequalled in our history. It has created unparalleled environmental threats to ourselves and to our future generations. He also argues that the very technology that has enabled us to manipulate and control nature has also polluted our environment and rapidly depleted our natural resources. It is realized that environmental damage inevitably threatens the welfare of human beings as well as plants and animals (Velasquez, 2002). Obviously, our human actions contribute a lot as far as the environmental destruction or degradation is concerned.

Morrison (1999) also attests to Velasquez’ idea that in modern times our economic and technological needs have led to us ignoring the effects of our actions on the environment such as dumping of toxic or nuclear wastes damage to the ozone layer from chemicals, deforestation, desertification, pollution of air and water, damage to soil, erosion and the destruction of many species of plants and animals. The result, he argues that today we find ourselves in a situation where resources are being used up at an alarming rate and effects like pollution is threatening the health of people and other living things. Thus, this article calls us to promote an ecological ethic which is the ethic where the welfare of at least some nonhumans is intrinsically valuable. And, because of this intrinsic value, we humans have a duty to respect and preserve environment.

Antal (2018) in his book, *Climate, Church Climate World: How people of faith must work for change*, points it out that climate change is the greatest moral challenge humanity

has ever faced: hunger, refugees, poverty, inequality, deadly viruses and war. Climate change multiplies all forms of global social injustice. He argues that the church needs to meet this moral challenge, to embrace a new vocation so that the future generations might live in harmony with God's creation. Therefore it is important for people to embrace new ways of spiritual practices that honour creation and activate hope. Indeed there is need for change to understand what environment is all about and especially how best we could promote its protection based on the Word of God in practical terms. Then how can the environmental ethics be extended to the faithful? To what extent are they exposed to what climate change is about? This calls for the faithful have an environmental awareness and to all the challenges therein.

Furthermore, many Christians are insensitive to the effects of the abuse of the environment. That is why Bouma (2023) argues that although our planet faces ecological crises including climate change, many Christians continue to view their faith as primarily a "spiritual" matter that has little relationship to the world in which we live. But Bouma (2023) contends that protecting and restoring our planet is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. Minding about the spiritual part of a human being without caring for environmental issues is detriment to the well-being of humankind. That is both environment and spirituality go hand in hand one can't take one and leave the other. The faithful while dealing with environmental ethics must view it holistically. The spiritual part of human beings does not exist in vacuum! Christians in this respect are called to acknowledge their identity as earth keepers and hence embrace their calling to serve and protect their home planet.

Yet, in his other book, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian vision for creation care (engaging Culture)*, Bouma (2010) realizes that caring for the environment is a growing interest amongst evangelicals. It is pointed out that authentic Christian faith requires ecological obedience and urges Christians to acknowledge their responsibility and privilege as stewards of the earth. The idea of stewardship is very clear in the Bible beginning with Genesis in the Garden of Aden where man was put in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Gen.2:15). *Keeping it-* is part and parcel of the environmental stewardship which Bouma (2010) advocates for. Christians are still challenged to practice Genesis 2:15 as one of the central ways to boost environmental protection.

To what extent have Christians practiced this important teaching? Are they *keeping it* or are doing the reverse? Are they aware of what it means? Ecological obedience should be greatly cherished in the Christian flock of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In another related argument, Peterson (2021) connects people and trees. That is; there is a strong biblical connection between people and trees (being part of the environment). They both come from dirt (soil). He also notes that one of the first commands to Adam and Eve was to "*work and keep*" the garden – a garden of various plants including trees. 'Keeping' the garden is still very central for both an individual and the church as a command. It is optional but a command to fulfil.

Mackibben et.al (2022) underlines the centrality of environmental stewardship for an evangelical Christian in that evangelicals have a complex relationship with environmentalism. Some lament the church's apparent disinterest in humanity's negative impact upon the earth. Others denounce environmentalism as a distraction from the church's mission (Bouma, 2023). In the face of polarization over the issues, how should evangelicals steward creation well? In the light of Mackibben's words, in what ways are Christians today denouncing environmentalism? Are they sensitive about it or they are insensitive? In the Bible, there are obvious pointers to the promotion of environmental protection which could lead to a counter –response from such attitudes. Likewise, Brunner, et.al (2014) laments the slowness of Christians' in responding to environmental destruction. Today's church finds

itself in a new world, one in which environment issues like climate change and ecology degradation are vital. It is emphasized that in the eyes of many, the evangelical community has been slow to take up a call to creation care. How do Christians address this issue in a faithful way? Why slow? Thus, eco-theology should explore the global dimensions of creation care, calling Christians to meet contemporary ecological challenges with courage and hope. Hence, there is the urgency to have core values of hospitality, civility, honesty and partnership in relation to environment. If all these are applied, then instances of environmental degradation would lessen.

The earth is here for the use and benefit of human beings through the responsibility to ‘subdue’ the earth and ‘have *dominion*’ over it. This dominion mandate does not mean the human beings should not use in a destructive or wasteful way. For instance, Moses told the people of Israel to take care of the fruit trees during the time of war:

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls (Deut. 20:19-20).

We should use the resources wisely as good stewards not wastefully or abusively. But we should do this eagerly, with the knowledge that the earth has been created by God for our benefit. The earth’s purpose is to serve the well-being of the human race both for now and the future.

Elsewhere, The Holy See (Pope) - also has a great message regarding the proper use of the environment. He calls for a change of attitude toward its reversal:

When the human being considers himself the master of the universe and not its responsible steward, he or she justifies any kind of waste and treats the other people and nature as mere objects,” denying “the fundamental right of every person to live with dignity and to develop integrally. “The Holy Father therefore warned against modern consumerism, which has caused so much damage, reiterating his call for a “change of course.” “Everything is connected, and as a family of nations we must have a common concern: to see that the environment is cleaner, purer and preserved. And take care of nature, so that it takes care of us,” he said. He therefore insisted on the “individual and collective responsibilities” to ensure everybody’s right to a “safe, healthy and sustainable environment,” especially for the future generations. (Vatican news.) Accessed on Dec, 20, 2023)

Thus, it should be our individual and collective responsibility to promote a ‘safe, healthy and sustainable environment’ for future generations through being faithful and responsible stewards so that by taking care of nature, it reciprocates.

St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) had a passion for the advancement of environment through God’s creation: the earth, the *Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon*:

Most High, all---powerful, all---good Lord, All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor  
... Praised be you my Lord with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, Who is  
the day through whom you give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with great  
splendor, Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.  
Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in the heavens you have  
made them bright, precious and fair. Praised be you, my Lord, through Brothers Wind  
and Air, and fair and stormy, all weather's moods, by which you cherish all that you  
have made.  
Praised be you my Lord through Sister Water, So useful, humble, precious and pure.  
Praised be you my Lord through Brother Fire, through whom you light the night and  
he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.  
Praised be you my Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth who sustains and governs  
us, producing varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs. Amen (Ignatius Solidarity,  
2024).

The implication of the above canticle is that the faithful should have the same passion for creation (environment) and its significance by being faithful stewards since 'Mother Earth' sustains and governs us by producing varied fruits, flowers and herbs. We can't enjoy the fruits of environment unless we realize, affirm and internalize that it was made for human beings to use wisely and for future generations. On this, Kinoti (2006) underlines the fulfilment of all our human needs by God including our material needs for food, shelter, medicine and clothing (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). As a result believers shouldn't ignore what is happening today. Kinoti (2006) identifies three factors in particular that are harming God's creation: rapid population growth, especially in the majority world, an enormous increase in the consumption of resources, especially in rich countries; and the use of polluting technologies. Kinoti (2006) continues to enumerate other factors that affect our lives and the environment such as the overuse of land, loss of forests, water pollution, loss of species, loss of fish and pollution by chemicals. Regarding climate change, it is observed that so much coal, oil, wood and gas are being burned that the earth's atmosphere is changing and this causes changes in the earth's climate. The results would include devastating hurricanes and the floods while others will suffer from terrible droughts. Some species of plants and animals will become extinct, and malaria and other diseases will spread more quickly. By implication, liturgies need to be formulated as part of worship leading to sensitization of environmental education in churches and community.

To an extent, the Word of God encourages hard work of individuals (Gen. 2:15). Through hard work humanity obtains food, clothing and housing (the needs) and maintains the environment around them both for now and the future. Hard work contributes to the fight about poverty since it is one of the causes of environmental degradation. Abraham (1995) identifies poverty as a source of ecological degradation, and the alleviation of poverty by the poor their struggle for justice is an ecological concern. We cannot separate these two concerns because unless the poor have alternate sources of food and basic needs like fuel, they too will wantonly destroy whatever natural environment is around. The church is in dire need to continue promoting and motivating honesty, thriftiness and hard work so as to alleviate poverty.

Abraham (1995) also talks of the ethics of care going hand in hand with the alleviation of poverty. He notes that the logic of justice as developed in the West emphasizes rights, rules and respect for the other. It can be applied only to human beings-supposedly



equally. It is a balancing of rights and duties. In order to include the cosmos in the justice enterprise, we need to affirm an ethics of care. Justice expressing compassion is the biblical emphasis. The prophets did not talk about balancing interests and rights but about the righteous God's caring for and defending the poor. And defending the vulnerable and defenseless should also include defending our weak and silent partner, the earth. In the same vein, we need to see ourselves as rulers over nature but must think of ourselves as gardeners, caretakers, mothers and fathers, stewards, trustees, lovers, priests, co-creators and friends of a world that while giving us life and sustenance, also depends increasingly on us in order to continue both for itself and for us (McFague, 1979). While working towards the advancement of environmental ethics, there should be the consideration of human beings as the most significant entity of the universe (anthropocentric) without domination and exploitation. We need to have values that are essential to the survival of life: those of caring and sharing not domination and manipulation. The pattern of domination and exploitation can only lead to the silencing of nature and to the ecological death of both nature and humans. That is; there should be an interrelatedness for both nature and humanity. The scale of values essential for sustaining the inter-relatedness and wholeness of creation differs from the dominant value system of modern society: conservation not consumerism, need not greed, enabling power not dominating power, integrity of creation, not exploitation of nature (Hallman, 1995). Hence we need to build structures and adopt new lifestyles that nurture the said values and involving social political structures which can encourage genuine interdependence other dominating and exploiting nature. Likewise religious institutions should always work hand in hand with the governments for better conservation results.

In addition, it is noted that though much of this work is essentially Christian, various religions celebrate the Environment Day with resources for worship as part and parcel of environmental ethics. Excerpts from the prayers include:

Supreme Lord, Let there be peace in the sky and in the atmosphere,  
Peace in in the plant world and in the forests... (Atharvaveda)  
May every creature abound in wellbeing and peace...may every living being,  
Weak or strong, the long and the small, the short and medium-sized...may all  
attain peace (**Buddhist prayer**)  
O God! The creator of everything!  
You have that water is the source of life! When we have needs, you are the  
giver,  
When we are sick, you give us health,  
When we have no food, and you provide us with your bounty (**Muslim  
prayer**)  
Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind  
And for the air, cloudy and clear, and all weather!  
By which you give substance to your creatures!  
Be praised, my Lord, for our sister Mother Earth who sustains and governs us  
And produces fruits with colorful flowers and leaves (*St Francis of Assisi*)  
(Hallman, 1995).

The above worship resources by some of the Ancient Church Fathers could be incorporated into the liturgies of some religious groups to inform and educate people about the indispensable role of environment.

### **Conclusion**

Our attitude today towards our environment will determine our survival as human beings on earth and for the future ecological concerns about life. They are crucial and Christians shouldn't be insensitive about them in this current 21<sup>st</sup> century based on the scriptures and other related literature. Since the world's problems including environmental degradation are created by people, not as a result of some unseen force, so it makes sense that the same people should be willing and able to resolve many of those problems. They should be proactive and work towards environmental protection at all costs. Ecological issues should not be advanced only by Christians but by other faiths too since the effects experienced do not "religiously segregate". The Christian scriptures and words of the ancient fathers in faith contribute a lot towards fighting environmental crisis: *to work and keep the garden*. People should have a passion through promote stewardship to support environmental preservation.

### **Recommendations**

**Learn from St. Francis of Assisi:** Like St. Francis of Assisi, churches need to incorporate environmental concerns into worship by including, hymns, litanies, skits and liturgies among others: about the interrelatedness of environment and worship.

**Eco-theology.** This should be actively incorporated in theological schools as it focuses on the relationship between religion and the natural environment on its sustainability, Christian care and social justice

**Advocacy:** The churches need to support any relevant initiatives and policies that protect the environment and also those that advocate for environmental justice.

**Community Engagement.** The church needs to organize events that are related to the preservation of environment namely the community events or clean ups aimed at the promotion of environmental awareness and action.

**Incorporation of environmental stewardship.** This can be through sermons and teachings and teachings, emphasizing the moral obligation to care for creation based on Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 24 and other related teachings on the same (stewardship).

**Partnership and support:** Churches need to team with other faiths (interfaith) and also with sustainable development projects since environmental concerns affect all irrespective of ones religion.

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