

# COMMUNITY: ECOLOGICAL AND ECUMENICAL

HOLMES ROLSTON, III

The most haunting photographs from the Apollo space shot series are not those of the unexplored and desolate lunar surface but rather those that look homeward to catch this planet in fresh perspective — an orb of blue and green, brown and white, half lit, half in darkness, adrift in the void. Surely his soul is dead (to make Scott cosmopolitan) who is not stirred by that memorable overview of his own, his native planet. Turning homeward, the astronauts have been unashamedly nostalgic. One of the most promising of the spin-offs from the space program is the spiritual energy generated by that earthward look. Indeed this intangible gain may be an unanticipated dividend that justifies NASA's enormous expense, and without which the investment would be in vain. Not until man has got off the planet does he see it as it is and ought to be — there, shining in the night of space, one world.

The scene arrests; but more: it haunts. For conjoined with the vision of one world there is the shadow of none. That gem, free and lovely in space, is rapidly and perhaps irreversibly becoming an open cesspool. Man fears lest already he has sown on it the seeds of destruction, lest his domicile, plundered and poisoned, is destined by his hand to become as barren as the forbidding reaches of the moon. The world was once man's home, his mother earth. But now he has become her planetary cancer. It is the time of END (Environment Near Death). For the first two thirds of the century we worried that man would destroy himself in inter-human conflict, a suicide by mutual genocide. In recent decades that fear has altered, and a new one replaced it. We can begin to see a detente brother to brother. But now, say the prophets, in the latter third of the century, man will destroy himself in terrestrial conflict. The end will come in suicide by geo-cide. Man will slay his earth, and be slain by it.

Ecumenism and ecology! The common etymology of the words is suggestive of a single theme. The great new religious development of our era has been the ecumenical movement, the vision of one world spiritually. The origins are Christian, but the reach is catholic, cosmopolitan. The search for the unity of the church is ultimately, we are now realizing, a question about the community of man. We are offended by the scandal of alienation between man and man, between Christian and Christian, between Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Marxist, and humanist. Our dialogues attest our hope that detente

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HOLMES ROLSTON, III is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Colorado State University. This paper was read before the Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1972.

may develop into encounter, co-existence into fellowship within the *oikoumene*, the household. The great new scientific development of this decade is our entrance into the "era of ecology" (Udall), in essence a vision of one world environmentally, the pursuit of a *logos* of the *oikos*. We are offended by the scandal of alienation between man and his earth, his fellow creatures, his home. Our alarm attests our hope that there will be reconciliation. These two contemporary concerns in science and religion, diverse disciplines that have often been at odds one with another, are one problem that has surfaced twice. For at depth, seen synoptically, the issue is man and his *oikos*, his household. There is one momentum that drives them both: the dream that the round planet, shining in space, shall be a total community.

Ecology may turn out to be our toughest ecumenical problem, for brother cannot abide with brother until they together have learned to reverence their common home. Ecology may be our most significant ecumenical opportunity, as its importunate challenges draw us together into an ethico-ecosystem. Ecumenics may turn out to be our toughest ecological problem. Human ecology is plural, among men who sin, and they will not care well for earth until they love one another. Perhaps our severest ravages of earth now arise when brother arms himself against brother. And it is in competition one with another in the face of earth's scarcity that we prostitute her. An ecumenical advance may turn out to be ecology's noblest success, for could man cease his sin against his earth, then he would cease his sin against his brother. The problem is one: broken community. The physicians of the two decades past, the fifties and sixties, have been the ecumenists. We wish them godspeed, and hope that their self doubts and weariness of the present can be dispelled. But at this moment when the surge toward ecumenical unity has hesitated, there have appeared new saviors. The physicians of the seventies and eighties are the ecologists. Yet the impetus is the same, only the point of eruption has altered.

Science has of late become holistic again. In a prized term, distressingly reminiscent of the medieval vanity of theology, ecology is "the ultimate science." Ever increasing compartmentalization has characterized modern science since its inception, making of natural philosophy a hundred separated disciplines, mineralogy, computer science, cryogenics, radiation biology, electronics, hydrology. That trend has reversed. Until recently, the scientist was an analytic specialist, a narrow man in a narrow field. But the ecologist is insatiably synthetic. If he specializes, it is only for want of energy to attack the whole, or that the whole may be known from its parts. His aspirations are to nothing less than a knowledge of the integrated whole. This ulti-

mate science is inevitably a "subversive science." Asks Paul B. Sears: "Is ecology a phase of science of limited interest and utility? Or, if taken seriously as an instrument for the long-run welfare of mankind, would it endanger the assumptions and practices accepted by modern societies, whatever their doctrinal commitments?" (*BioScience* 14(7):11, 1964)

So far as it approaches ultimacy, it has a world view, an understanding of the *oikos*. If the ecologist is to succeed, to science he must add values, meanings, religion, ethics, aesthetics. With that, science is passing over into something else. At heart the ecologist is a priest. "Science has undermined many of our religious beliefs. If it can make any claim to replacing them with a code of ethics, with an understanding of the purpose of life, I think this will be found in the ecological approach to knowledge, in the development of an 'ecological conscience.'" (R. E. Balch, *The Ecological Viewpoint*, 1965, p. 56) Or in the words of another enthusiast: "Yesterday ecology was a science. Today it is a social problem. Tomorrow, if we are to keep making this scene, it had better become something like a religion. Thou shalt learn to live on thy planet, and keep it whole." (Kerry Thornley, *Sierra Club Bulletin*, December 1969, p. 20) We wish our newest redeemers god-speed, for God's speed they will need, lest they commit again the sin of Adam, much less correct it. And God's speed they may have. Perhaps in openness to the insights of the eco-prophets, the ecumenists may find their energies restored.

Sin pollutes the world. An ancient insight is breaking over us anew. The Hebrew myths of primal man are charged again with relevance. We had thought that the science had been drained out of them by geologist, biologist, and anthropologist. They enshrined, we conceded at length, only theological truth, and we were increasingly less sure of that. But for this ultimate science in need of a *logos*, the early Hebrews, in whom land and faith are inseparably combined, will, I judge, prove better ecologists than we have initially supposed. From them we have a profound myth of aboriginal community—total community—and man's fall from it. He is made for fellowship at multiple levels: with his God, with his brother, and with his world. In the latter two he discovers the first.

In the Genesis accounts, there are two striking components to man's imaging of God. First, he is made male and female. "Let us make man in our own image . . . male and female." The odd divine plural, doubtless a polytheistic relic, is transformed biblically into a fascinating suggestion of divine community to be imitated by men. Man is to be humanist. The nearest focus is human sexual together-

ness; the farthest focus is the society of men filling the earth. Out of the couple issues family, and the family generates a catholic community. Man images God in the inter-human; the similitude is ecumenical. I take the Sage (for this is wisdom literature we are now told) to be an early ecumenist in this broad sense, a prefatory to Abraham's mission to all families of earth. As such community flourishes, human life prospers; as it disintegrates, life is atrophied and at length impossible. Man is a corporate, political animal.

Secondly, man images God in the dominion which he enjoys and to which he is enjoined. He is put in the garden as husbandman and steward, "to till it and keep it." He feeds upon the flora; the fauna are those whom he "names" in the deep and full Hebrew sense of "name" — as Yahweh had named, "Adam." He is made with them of dust, yet is the noble patriarch of creatures and has commensurate filial responsibility for them. He rules on earth; no relative species is found his equal, none a "helper fit for him." For this level of companionship he looks to woman. He images God as he "keeps" this Eden. The similitude is ecological. The human community is thus set at the apex of but within a natural community; the domestic whole is "very good." The duty of man, his god-likeness in both its aspects, has this single root obligation to establish community in an eco-paradise.

The earliest sin is ecological. Dissatisfied with his ecological niche, Adam reaches to be god over his earth. The crown of creation he was, and it was proper to him to be master husbandman in his own home. But creature among creature he would not be. He might have lived in Eden, amply sustained by it, nourished physically, ontologically (we should perhaps say phylogenetically) from the tree of life, a symbol of his gracious, yet earthen sources and sustenance. But he despised the intrinsic goodness of his home. He reached for the tree of knowledge of good and evil; he proposed to fix his own ethico-ecosystem, to take the cosmos into his own hands to improve it. He fell into the settled grievance that his home was a niggardly gift of God. He sought escape. For his arrogant refusal to be earth, Eden disintegrates. The earth turns against him who has turned from it. Vertically, his sin is against his Maker; but horizontally, its locus and measure is in his attitude toward his place under the sun. Hence the character and relevance of his judgment: punitive but also corrective as it confirms him in his earthiness. The earliest alienation is not between man and man; the sin of Cain comes after. The primal sin is environmental. Eden is despised and, after that and issuing from that, man hates his brother. He who will not keep Eden will neither be his brother's keeper.

There is a seemingly paradoxical use of the motif that man is to be like his God. On the one hand man is made to image God, but the first couple's initial act of sin is rooted in their desire to be like God. The resolution of that paradox is essentially a matter of Adam's relationship to his garden paradise. Within his ecosystem, man is a unique member of his community, the dominant species. From within, he may and ought reflect the divine. But in this lordship, he is an insider, a pensioner, linked inseparably to the systemic whole, dependent by Yahweh's charge upon the food chains that typify the natural cycle. His life support is in that environment. He is over Eden, but his is of Eden, indigenous to it. This capacity for ecological vocation aborts in sin, as man reaches for independence. He spurns his engagement to earth. He moves to exclude himself from that natural order in which God has included him. Vertically, the couple challenge God; horizontally this is identical with their grudge against Eden. Their desire is to be free ecologically, to feed elsewhere, to be gods exotic to Eden and earth, rather than in affirming earth and brother to become god-like men. But this is Yahweh's only taboo.

So the good earth binds Adam the more closely. His home becomes a prison. Man spirals downward, while vowing to escape. The ground is cursed, yet cries out to curse Cain for his brother's blood drenched upon it. The subsequent narratives detail the intensification of this alienation. Man builds at length a proud tower of Babel, a symbol of his wish to escape his earth. He learns nothing from the nemesis of the deluge, for all its ruthless witness to his fragile earthiness. The Hebrew faith thereafter is at its core the hope that God will again set man in a land flowing with milk and honey, and this comes in turn to pre-figure the Judeo-Christian hope that man will at length be reconciled to his earth, in consummation of Eden so long lost.

"Subdue and have dominion!" For century upon century we treasured that charge, for it spoke of the excellences of man. It was the sole element of the Genesis saga that proved congenial to modern science. Hence its force did not abate despite the turmoil of the last century. With the appearance of the *Origin of Species*, and nature red in tooth and claw, "subdue and conquer" seemed the only vestige of Genesis that was an evolutionary virtue. Man's brain fitted him for conquest; and to that duty his religion exhorted him. On the verge of the completion of this world's conquest, he has of late launched into space for other words to conquer. But suddenly there are second thoughts about this antagonism. Has that conquest been a pyrrhic victory? Is man lord of his earth? Or warlord that scourges his earth? Did not another speak of inheriting the earth in meekness? The con-

quest of earth supposes a Pentagon mentality; it made us ecological bigots; we are a race of geomaniaacs obsessed with harnessing nature to serve our pleasures. How soon virtues become vices! Now it is not uncommon to hear ecologists lay the blame for the ecological crises on the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to condemn the Genesis world view as an illusion with but relict survival value. Alas, distorted and fractured by his sin, man has used these Genesis words to foster his colossal conceit.

The Genesis exhortation has been defiled with infralapsarian arrogance, but, unspoiled, it remains ecologically sound. Man is to "rule" (*radah*, "have dominion") his earth and, whatever pejorative use the Hebrew word may sometimes have, such rule, if it is to reproduce the rule of Elohim, is an economy of order. The retrograde sense of "subdue" (*kabash*) which is offensive to us understands here a license to plunder earth to serve man's lustful pleasures. But this overlooks altogether the gracious lordship of Yahweh, which man's ruling is to image. He is not a despot, but an *oikodespotes*, a householder. Sovereignty has commensurate responsibility. Noah is the prototype of that rule ecologically, as he takes into the ark with his *oikos* (*LXX*) the beasts to keep them. In him the creation blessings are renewed; the bow is set as a sign of covenant between God and the biosphere; the prohibition against eating blood is in token of reverence for life.

The reach of that responsible lordship in God is shown ultimately in *agape* in Christ. In the new Adam it is a kenotic lordship. *Deus dilexit mundum* . . . To subdue, in this supralapsarian, christological sense, is essentially the charge to maintain community in the natural world—as analogously the charge to multiply and fill the earth is essentially a charge to establish a human community. "Subdue" in the *LXX* is *archo*, "to lead," combining ideas of being first and of governing. Far from cutting against contemporary ecological theory, the charge to man is that he shall be a steward (*oikouros*), an ecologist, an economist, that he shall ascertain and impose a *logos* and *nomos* of his *oikos*. He maintains the integrity of his community, lest it revert to formless void. Alone among the creatures, uniquely, he is capable of rational and moral activity, and can therefore prescribe law; the others simply describe it. Exclusively in the community, he is self-conscious, and therefore, as its mind, he must mind it. The charge that she shall have dominion is the mythological equivalent of the biological claim that he is the dominant species. But as so often in man's religious history, good is by subtle yet profound shifting transvalued into evil. The lordship that ought have evoked his *agape* rather feeds his *eros*. What ought to have insured community now destroys it. Man's dominion on

earth was to be its positive blessing. But, like inserting a negative sign before a mathematical parenthesis, in sin an asset becomes a liability.

If he is to "subdue" in the structured P narrative, he is in the simpler and more exuberant J narrative to "keep" his earth — as the Lord keeps Israel. Eden is a gracious web of interdependent life: fauna and flora in a watered, verdant, fruitful land. Here man is "at home." Man is to conserve it so. No more than the command to fill the earth warrants overpopulation, since it is destructive of ecumenical community, does the command to subdue earth warrant abuse and plunder, equally destructive of ecological community. Seen synoptically, the narratives blend. "Subdue and have dominion." That thesis sets man over nature. "Eat, but only of the native trees of the garden. Till the garden and keep it." That antithesis obligates man to nature. The truth lies in their synthesis, where man is "*adham* (man) of '*adhamah* (earth),' noble *primus inter pares*, who governs and moderates for the sake of the whole domestic fraternity. That capacity for dominion has gone awry, we now fear, but in the crisis which faces us there is evidence of man's phenomenal power on the planet. The apocalyptic warnings of the ecologists contain an implicit confession that man looses forces of a velocity nowhere approached by the other creatures. If he must answer to earth, as must all, he is nonetheless the creature whom earth has most to fear.

In the aftermath of Darwin, the earth was fragmented; her unity ruptured by divisive pluralism, a war of all against all. The planet was hell, its only law the law of the jungle. The earth was not a home; it was alien and enemy, with neither mercy nor justice, indifferent if not malevolent to individuals and to species. By this account, earth is a prison for man and beast, marked by death, pain, struggle, disease, randomness, and ineptitude. The life of a man is of a piece with the whole. Man is condemned to prey upon his fellows. Or if he aspires to more, he does so against the grain of this world — not as a beast. Such a mood carries a tacit claim that the earth is meaningless, if not evil. In either case there is the denial of community.

But we are witnessing now a profound change of mood. Without denying the facts of the biologists before them, we are getting a revised account from the ecologists. There is more. Chaos coheres. With maturing insight, what was before a war of all against all is seen as a "web of life." What was hell is "the harmonious unity of the biosphere." The survival of the fittest is seen alongside of, and indeed as including, mutual interdependence. The planet that Darrow characterized as a miserable little "wart" in the universe, eminently unsuited and hostile to life, especially human life, is now a sheltered oasis in

space. The harmony is often strange, nor is it surprising that in our immaturity we mistook it for disharmony, but it is an intricate and delicate harmony nonetheless. Of late the world has ceased to threaten, save as we violate it. Now it is a home again, that keeps us as we keep it. When we have been ecologically tutored, the supposed meaninglessness and malevolence vanishes, and we rejoice in our earth. There is a benevolent orderliness of life. But insights are deeper now; the focus is off the individual. Essentially what has evolved is community. Generated out of a *coincidentia oppositorum*, the product of evolution is a dynamic mosaic of interdependent cohabitation. The individual is valued primarily for his place in and contribution to the ecosystem.

We have long known, though not sufficiently been impressed by, the fact that all higher forms of life are cellular communities. Evolution is the story of progressively more complex cellular organization, a theme developed in interesting countercurrent to the antagonist pressures of the jungle, and for which the latter seem prerequisite. The unity that is the human self is possible only by the diversification of vast number of cells; these all integrate to function as a person. I am not an aggregate, nor a swarm, nor a plurality. I am one whole, and my wholeness is a matter of community. The truth that has dawned upon us by recent insight of the ecologist is that the community that I am is not bounded by the borders of my body. What John Donne taught us about fraternity: “. . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee,” — the ecologist has taught us about consanguine ties to clod and beast. Community is physiological; it is social; it is environmental. The self's eco-vascular system inter-penetrates the environment. I am integrated into an extensive biome, nourished by a geo-biomass. The death of the land diminishes me. Pollution in air and water is poison in my system. There are gradients away from my effective environment, but the wholeness is far vaster than first appears. The loss of the Everglades or of the whooping crane is my tragedy, for by so much is my community and therefore my life atrophied. A dead eagle is a community loss. A tundra lost is qualitatively like a leg amputated, only quantitatively less severe.

My life is a series of concentric circles and recurring cycles — inorganic substances, producers, consumers, and decomposers — that form a systemic whole, my “field.” My metabolism is global. The rounded planet is the boundary of my *oikos*. So physiology passes into autecology, to synecology, to eco-community, and even to eco-organism. One of the most interesting ecological models, bizarre though it seems



to the layman, is that which regards certain ecosystems as superorganisms, as, for instance, the grasslands in the work of Frederic E. Clements and the Nebraska school, or the social animals, of which the beehive is a classic example. The extent to which this is taken as fruitful analogy or as literal fact is debatable; in either case it suggests the seriousness with which the unity, or community, of the system is regarded.

The parasites, the saprophytes, the mycorrhizal and commensal organisms, the helots, the symbionts were once considered out of the ordinary and of special interest in biology. But now that special interest is seen as particular cases that reveal in extreme the general character of all life. The system is symbiotic throughout. *Bios* is indispensably *sym-biosis*, whether conjunctive as in such specific examples or disjunctive as is generally the case. Biological values are more comprehensive than we had first supposed. And, as is often the case when we return to mental giants, we find that the oversimplification which we had suffered was not the fault of our mentor. For Darwin explained: "I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another." (*Origin of Species*, chapter 3) It includes both cooperation and competition between individuals and between species. Symbiosis in its many forms is not the exception but the underlying architectonic, superimposed on which is the motif of competition and disoperation. The symbiotic character of all life is obvious in the rearing of the young, less obvious but equally present in the cyclic food chains. Indeed it is nowhere absent. Even predation is commensurate with mutualism, for it disciplines and blesses community. Otherness and opposition are in counterpoint to a profound togetherness in life.

The keynote is a reconciliation of the diverse components of phenomenal experience. At one level they impress upon us their contradictoriness and conflict. But at another they are melted into a unity of life. The biosciences have followed a Hegelian path, from pluralism to monism. *E pluribus unum*. Lately they have drawn the physical sciences with them. But the end of that path is the vision of a catholic, world encircling harmony. And religion is having to learn from science one of its own ancient insights. The pantheistic mystics have asserted for centuries that division and separateness are correctly seen only in the larger truth that the universe is an indivisible whole, a *koinonia*, and that man immersed in this whole moves from strife to peace, from alienation to reconciliation, from something partial to something whole, from smallness into vastness, from individuality into community. The ecosystem is a recent term for an ancient philosophical model.

With the inclusion of man, an ecosystem becomes an ethico-ecosystem, an ecumeno-ecosystem. In man there is novelty, and yet, the novelty which emerges is, at least potentially, of a piece of the continuous whole. The critics smile when one leaps from the symbiotic character of non-human life to preach of human community, whether interspecific or intraspecific. The former community is casual, instinctive; the latter community, both in its ecological and ecumenical dimensions, is intentional, teleological. To connect them is to relate incommensurables. To speak, say they, of ecumenical community as homologous to (if not the intraspecific subset of) ecological community is indulgent anthropomorphic moralizing. To move to prescriptive human ecology on the basis of descriptive ecology is to move without license from bioscience to ethics.

But the communities are continuous. Human ecology is ecology, notwithstanding its becoming ethno-ecology. Man is nothing else than community become conscious of itself—to revise Julian Huxley's "evolution become conscious of itself." Out of proto-cooperation rises cooperation. What nature accomplishes causally and instinctively prior to man, she accomplishes intentionally and purposively in the presence of man. Her incessant pursuit of community rises to novel heights, but still she pursues community. Life proceeds from the simple to the complex by reciprocity: physiologically, ecologically, psychologically, sociologically. The human body is a cellular community in an environmental community, one aspect of which is ecumenical community. The person exists in encounter with his world, other species, and others of his species. His noetic life, whether focused on the inter-human, as in the humanities, or on the environmental, as in the sciences, is evolution's most recent intensification of intricate interdependence. That a prescription to symbiosis replaces a description of it is a higher manifestation of a continuing theme. The right is that which maximizes community; the wrong is that which destroys it. Ecologically, that charge is to keep the earth a domestic whole. Ecumenically, the charge is to fraternity. In both earth-keeping and brother-keeping, the survival of the fittest culminates in an ethico-religious obligation, and comes to mean that those who develop mutually beneficial relationships, centered not on self but on community, are the fit. Darwin and Jesus are synthesized.

Science as we know it in the Western world has been fired in rather large measure by the intent to subdue nature, as that subduing is warped in sin, and hence not without a certain perverse theological backing. The desire of the scientist is to manipulate, to use, to master, to make nature his subject. This is obviously so in applied science, but

as often as not the case in academic science. Witness Bacon's "knowledge . . . is power; . . . *scientia potestas est.*" ("De Haeresibus") However much that enterprise has repeatedly revealed man's inseparable earthen connections, he has hoped that by his cleaverness he could exempt himself from the inexorable limits of the natural order, reaching ultimate freedom in omnipotence through technology. It is not coincidental that Genesis views the progress of primitive technology as an infralapsarian vocation — as Bacon also knew: ". . . the desire of knowledge in excess caused man to fall" ("Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature"). In that wisdom which was reached for first in Eden man seeks to determine his own goods, and by so much as he succeeds, he supposes himself to escape the chains with which he is bound to his world. But the tree of this knowledge is not that of life. Such polarization is pathological; it has made of us dualists in which intimate communion with the natural order is fragmented. Man, the subject, makes of nature his object. With the advent of ecology, that classical posture of science is transvalued, for now the emphasis is not man's mastery over and escape from nature, but man's inclusion within and subjection to the natural order. Notwithstanding his dominance, he is participant, communicant, in encounter with his world. But with that insight, this ultimate science has recovered the spiritual vision long clouded by sin: that man's good, his life, lies within this Eden-earth's bounds. He must know that community, but the Hebrew use of "know" is spiritually healthier.

It is a small planet. Seen from space it is hardly more than a glistening dewdrop sparkling in the night. But there is vast richness upon it, and the richness is enhanced, not diminished by the fact that we now know that the wealth of our island ecosystem is not inexhaustible. The roundness of the globe has resulted in physical compression that generates a social pressure that compels men toward community. On our shrinking earth, social temperatures have risen so as increasingly to generate ecumenical community. The scarcity of resources is now exerting a corresponding ecological pressure equally compelling of community. Where environmental pressures rise, there ecological community is intensified. And we are spiritually the richer when our rounded home has become a commonwealth, a *res publica*.

Religious thought has for some while been fascinated with the *saeculum*, the present world. For many that has been a cause of alarm, a diversion from the Christian's primary ecumenical task. But it is clearer now where we are headed. I judge that in the providence of God religious secularism is not a diversion. Let us grant some sense in which it is proper to the saint to turn from his world. But the more

important truth for the present is our primary responsibility of world affirmation. Here lies our divine similitude. Our charge is to live on earth, and keep it, in this light world negation is the root sin. The urge to world care, to attend our *oikos*, is as god-like as the urge to neighborliness. The winds of this worldliness are the winds of Elohim. If we can focus our spiritual energies conjointly with our scientific energies on a solution of man's estrangement from his home, we may then be coming within sight of our destiny: to establish an earthen community, ecological and ecumenical, and in so doing to become sons of God.

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