



Book Review

Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition

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Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition uses contemporary and historical perspectives to map out the diversity of secularization processes in Buddhism, and introduces crucial topics for scholars and Buddhist practitioners interested in the secularization discourse. This collection of thirteen essays includes perspectives and in-depth analyses by contemporary academic scholars and Buddhist practitioners, both lay and monastic, covering disciplines and subject areas such as Buddhist studies, religious studies, social sciences, psychology, education, psychotherapy, economics, management, and material culture. The book's main goal is to provide a "snapshot that is multidimensional in nature" (6), and to address an intended readership of academic scholars and Buddhist practitioners. Both objectives are achieved through the diversity of subject areas covered and contributors included.

In his introduction, Richard K. Payne acknowledges the inherent challenge a collection on such a complex subject faces, pointing out that "the concept of the 'secular' is perhaps one of the most overtheorized categories in the study of religion." He offers the reader some orientation in this "dark and tangled conceptual wood" (4) by addressing the relationship of several essential terminologies and concepts. Payne invites the reader to move away from understanding "secular and religious Buddhism" as "seemingly mutually exclusive categories" (1), instead conceiving *secular* and *religious* as standing in a dynamic relationship to each other, as socially constructed, and with no objective referents. Payne proposes to continue the use of the three conceptual dyads that have structured most of the discourse about the development of Buddhism in the last centuries: (1) secular/religious, (2) modern/traditional, and (3) Eastern/Western. However, Payne points out that these need to be understood only as orienting poles of a dialectic in a much more ambiguous relationship. Consequently, they need to be analyzed on a case-to-case basis and used with caution. One example of such problematic pairing would be to generally equate *religious with traditional* and *secular with modern*, equations which have often led to normative stances and might cloud our judgment when investigating non-Western empirical materials. In addition, Payne clarifies important distinctions in the discourse around secular Buddhism, such as between secular as understood in a more historical sense as differentiation processes, in contrast to secularism as a political agenda; between Buddhist modernism and secularization; and different motivators for secularization. In sum, his introduction equips the reader with necessary foundational knowledge and historical context without overloading them and, indeed, illuminates this "dark and tangled conceptual wood."



In that critical spirit, the contributors employ their understanding and interpretation based on, but not limited to, this framework. Each chapter is characterized by thorough analysis and frequent consideration of new empirical materials and theoretical perspectives, which often interdisciplinary in scope. The chapters often stand in captivating dialogue with each other as will be demonstrated below (for example, Bodhi/Fronsdal/Jackson and McMahan/Purser/Gregory). In the following overview and discussion, I point out interesting aspects and key messages of the essays and categorize them into five general themes. First, three essays (by Jones, Crosby, and Shaw) are closely connected to historical analysis. Second, two (by Hsu and Winfield) address the secularization of Buddhism in the public spheres of education and museums. Third, three chapters (by Gregory, Purser, and McMahan) examine the effects on the individual and society resulting from secularized Buddhist mindfulness practices, and two chapters (by Jackson and Bodhi) analyze the secularization of Buddhist doctrines such as rebirth. Fourth, two chapters (by Turenne and Fronsdal) discuss in detail one secular and one naturalistic approach to Buddhism. And fifth, the concluding essay (by Payne) addresses conscious and unconscious dynamics in the secularizing discourse of Buddhism itself.

In his chapter “Establishing the Pure Land in the Human Realm” (115–133), Charles B. Jones questions aspects of the prior Western academic reception of Taixu (1890–1947) as modernizer and secularizer. He concludes that Taixu should be perceived as a “transitional figure” (116), and that the secularizing aspects of his writings have been sometimes overstated. Based on a close reading and summary of Taixu’s essay “On the Establishment of the Pure Land in the Human Realm” (*Jianshe renjian jingtu lun*, 1926), which was most influential on the movement of humanistic Buddhism, Jones draws attention to neglected religious aspects in Taixu’s writing, such as the aspiration of rebirth either in Amitābha’s Pure Land or Maitreya’s Tuṣita Heaven, Buddhist cosmology, and reliance on scriptural citations. Juxtaposing his detailed reading with earlier readings by Western scholars, Jones demonstrates the importance of a critical assessment of the exact relationship between modernization and secularization on a case-by-case basis in text-critical work with empirical materials, possibly decoupling them. Jones’s chapter thus shows how the general equation of *modern with secular* and *religious with traditional* can lead to inappropriately applying Anglo- or Eurocentric perspectives on non-European modernization processes. I have also illustrated this point in my recent work on Buddhism in Bhutan (Schwerk 2019).

In “The Shared Origins of Traditionalism and Secularism in Theravāda Buddhism” (135–161), Kate Crosby maps how European expansionism and colonial administration, as well as cultural encounters both with India and with the West, have shaped different responses in the Theravāda Buddhist world of Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka since the late nineteenth century. Crosby clearly illustrates the complex interplay of global, national, and individual factors and concludes with a brief case study of the heresy trial of the Burmese monk Shin Ukkaṭṭha (1897–1978). In Myanmar, heresy trials deal with activities that supposedly contradict Buddhist doctrine (Pali, *adhamma*) or monastic rules (Pali, *avinaya*). Crosby details how, interestingly, the same reaction, namely the rhetoric of the decline of the “teaching or dispensation” (136) of Buddhism (Pali, *sāsana*) shaped the diametrically opposed responses of traditionalism and secularism, in Myanmar and Thailand, respectively. However, she points out that those responses must be perceived on a spectrum and must consider exchanges *within* the Buddhist Theravāda world and India—exemplified in the later emergence of Burmese vipassana-style meditation in Thailand. Moreover, discourses about science and religion and related social differentiation processes are found well before the colonial era, as visible in the rejection of secular subjects in the monastic curriculum in the eighteenth century in Sri Lanka and Myanmar and the complex somatic practices of *boran* meditation in Thailand, that originally included fields that could be called secular, such as obstetrics, medicine, and the military. Crosby also discusses Buddhist nationalism, Islamophobia, and the relationship to other religions as part of those responses. In that spirit, she poignantly concludes that “those

who share an interest in the genuine teaching of the Buddha may be looking at mutually unrecognizable visions of the dharma” (159). Her chapter underlines the importance of detailed historical analysis employing careful consideration of emic and etic perspectives.

In her chapter “Has Secularism Become a Religion? Some Observations on Pāli Buddhism’s Movement to the International Stage” (29–55), Sarah Shaw reflects on the secularization of Buddhist mindfulness practices from the nineteenth century onwards in the Asian Buddhist world to its current adaptation in Western secular sciences, such as psychology and psychotherapy in the form of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). While she points out the benefits of secularized mindfulness practices in clinical settings today as a form of useful “orthopraxy,” she warns against a new “orthodoxy” of secularism, in which secularism equals rationality, science, and truth (48–52). It is important to note that Shaw uses the term secularism in the spirit of George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) as a neutral term separating some forms of “social interaction and discourse” from the sphere of religion without any negative stance toward religion (32). Her use of the term secularism is therefore to be differentiated from the more common use of the term entailing a political agenda. Further, she brings today’s developments into conversation with what she sees as a general characteristic of Buddhism from early on: its adaptation to different political, social, and cultural contexts and its interaction with other secular societal spheres. Using excerpts from the Pali Canon and Aśoka’s rock edicts, she presents a secular reading of singular aspects of early Buddhist history. Shaw’s contribution brings attention to important secularizing and “universalist” aspects (51) in Buddhist history long before the nineteenth century, aspects important for a differentiated understanding of today’s secularization of Buddhist mindfulness practices in the West.

Based on the example of the inclusion of secularized mindfulness practices into the curriculum of American public schools, Funie Hsu shows, in “American Cultural Baggage: The Racialized Secularization of Mindfulness in Schools” (79–93), how the rhetoric of secularized mindfulness practices as scientific, rational, universal, and efficacious results in the racial and religious exclusion of Asian American Buddhists and the stigmatization of other forms of Buddhist religious practice. Furthermore, such rhetoric reinforces neoliberal education models by centering mindfulness practice solely on the benefits of better performance, stress-reduction, or well-being, for mostly white and convert-Buddhist individuals. The great strength of Hsu’s essay lies in demonstrating how secularization processes are not value-free or context-free processes but rather how they can (re)produce imperialistic and racialized violence. Hsu challenges the reader to engage in critical reflection on the consequences of secular mindfulness rhetoric—intended or not—and the challenges to integrating secularized mindfulness practices in public education in the specific US-American constitutional context. In sum, Hsu’s essay calls for the “long overdue public recognition of Asian American Buddhist presence and belonging in the US” (91).

In “Curating Culture: The Secularization of Buddhism through Museum Display” (95–114), Pamela D. Winfield takes the reader through complex de- and recontextualization processes of religious objects from Japanese Buddhist temples into European-style secular museums both in Japan and in the West, beginning with the Meiji period (1868–1912). She draws out different responses to the Western binary of “sacred” and “secular”/“profane” (97) as they are embodied in museum spaces, responses such as aesthetic objectification, emphasis on historical power relations of colonial exploitation, and religious objects as cultural heritage. Concentrating on Japan as a fascinating example of abrupt modernization processes, she concludes that the “process of secular museumification in Japan unfolded in three steps, from persecution to preservation and then to paradox” (103). As a case study, she looks closely at three examples from Japanese temple museums (“treasure-houses”). In those “hybrid” spaces (110), the dialectic relationship between the sacred and profane is constantly negotiated between multiple actors and remains ambiguous, which leads, in some cases, to a

“respiritualization” of originally religious objects (111). Winfield’s essay convincingly shows the importance of scholars’ synchronous consideration of multiple emic (Japanese) and etic (Western) perspectives (in this case, defining the conceptual dyad of sacred and profane in relation to Buddhist material objects in their respective historical contexts). In addition, Winfield draws attention to the importance of deliberate and active Japanese engagement with those etic conceptual dyads that followed from the cultural encounter between Japan and the West.

In “The Modern Mindfulness Movement and the Search for Psychological Redemption” (221–238), Kathleen Gregory analyzes possible negative results of secularized mindfulness practices found in her work as a counselling psychologist and in her practice as a Buddhist. She locates secularized Buddhist mindfulness practices within the broader context of the growth of “pop psychology,” the “psychologization” (228) of the self and society, and the latest “neurologization” trend (234) in Western societies and sciences. She then addresses how Jon-Kabat Zinn’s (2012) widely accepted secular definition of mindfulness (as being “cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” [225]) can reinforce undesired negative attitudes such as self-criticism, hypervigilance, or feeling a failure. Gregory then exemplarily shows how reflection on the three marks of existence (suffering, impermanence, and non-self) as core Buddhist teachings alleviates such a risk. In conclusion, Gregory’s essay illustrates how secular or psychologized mindfulness practices have to be carefully analyzed in the lived experience of individual secular or Buddhist practitioners and cannot simply be evaluated as generally positive or negative.

In “Secular Buddhism in a Neoliberal Age” (207–219), Ron Purser analyzes “how mindfulness—a central meditation practice among secular Buddhists—has become infected and shaped by neoliberal cultural forces producing an entrepreneurial subjectivity and self-policing individuals.” For Purser, “mindfulness serves an ideological function in ensuring the reproduction of capitalist relations and, in effect, has become the new capitalist spirituality” (207). Purser lays out in detail how the symbiosis between secular mindfulness practices and neoliberal ideologies can reinforce, in the Foucauldian sense of *governmentality*, the neo-liberal system and, as a result, functions as a “social anesthesia” (214). The logical consequence of looking for change only within the neoliberal individual—ourselves—is that social activism or collective action against questionable social, political, and economic structures is impeded. Purser uses the “privatization of stress” in the mindfulness movement as a convincing example to demonstrate how ignoring the systematic, institutional, and structural causes of stress leads to a “present momentism” that, in turn, feeds “social amnesia” and “political passivity” (213–217). The chapter gains strength from bringing arguments from important thinkers, such as Lauren Berlant, Michel Foucault, Henry Giroux, Slavoj Žižek, and Julie Wilson, into the criticism of the marriage between (parts) of the mindfulness movement and neoliberal ideology. Purser thus provides a crucial alternative narrative to the alleged success story of the mindfulness movement.

In “Buddhism and Secular Subjectivities: Individualism and Fragmentation in the Mirrors of Secularism” (57–78), David L. McMahan turns to different conceptions of the secular individual in earlier and later modernity (and postmodernity), identifying two main strands of secular subjectivity, namely “the sense of selfhood as singular, independent, and autonomous and the sense of fragmentation of the self into multiple identities” (60), and perceives of these conceptions as two opposing poles on a spectrum of interpretation. By introducing influential theorists such as Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Kenneth Gergen, McMahan successfully guides the reader through the complex intellectual history of “selfhood in the modern West” (60). He interprets “secularity” as “the pervasive naturalistic zeitgeist of the times” (59), central for modern interpretations of Buddhist doctrines and practices and influencing all forms of Buddhism in Europe and North America. McMahan demonstrates how contrarily the two versions of secular subjectivity

—individualist and fragmentary—play out in modern interpretations of the Buddhist doctrines of non-self and interdependence and modern practices of meditation. Perhaps, at first, counter-intuitively, he suggests the sense of a fragmented self can, in the best-case scenario, lead to a heightened sense of ethical, social, and political responsibility and social action as witnessed in the modern Buddhist ecological movement.

In his essay, “Avoiding Rebirth: Modern Buddhist Views on Past and Future Lives” (239–263), Roger R. Jackson turns to rebirth, a controversial Buddhist doctrine in the discourse of secularizing Buddhism. After providing a brief chronological overview of the doctrine of rebirth in Buddhist history, Jackson outlines different positions of Western scholars and Buddhist practitioners engaging (or not) in the discourse. These positions include classical arguments from Indian and Tibetan Buddhist scriptures (Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika*); the validation within Western scientific paradigms of evolutionary biology, subatomic physics, neuroscience, and philosophy (mostly within the mind-body problem); symbolic, psychological, and existential reinterpretations; first-person evidence; and agnosticism. Jackson categorizes scholars and practitioners into five partially overlapping types: (1) literalists, who accept the traditional categories; (2) neo-traditionalists, who reinterpret them within the knowledge frameworks of Western sciences; (3) modernists, who doubt and reinterpret them in symbolic, psychological, or existential terms; (4) secularists, who believe they do not matter and often do not discuss them at all; and (5) Donald Lopez’s “literalism as radical cultural critique” (245–258). He then briefly discusses his personal position, which he describes as falling into the category of “Modernism” and “As-If Agnosticism” (a variation of “Buddhist agnosticism” originally coined by Stephen Batchelor), concluding “and if there is a buddha field at the end of the rainbow, so much the better” (259–261). Jackson’s essay is a most helpful introduction to and thorough analysis of the complexity of the heated debate on rebirth and traditional Buddhist cosmology in Buddhist and academic circles today.

Bhikkhu Bodhi similarly addresses the secularization of Buddhist doctrines in his essay, “Manifesting the Buddha Dharma in a Secular Age” (163–184). He identifies three contemporary approaches to Buddhism among Western practitioners: (1) traditional, (2) secular, and (3) immanent (understood on a spectrum), and he self-identifies as a “traditional Buddhist” (181). The doctrinal position on rebirth (and connected Buddhist cosmological conceptions) is the decisive factor for him in distinguishing these approaches. In brief, traditional Buddhists accept those doctrines; secular Buddhists do not accept them, explicitly devaluing them as “ancient Indian metaphysics” (166); and immanent Buddhists generally avoid doctrinal issues and focus on “existential and psychological aims” (167–174). As a traditionalist, Bodhi cautions against light-heartedly casting away Buddhist doctrines in the name of adapting Buddhism to contemporary naturalistic and secular worldviews, since one “may actually cut off the bloodline that keeps the dharma alive” (172). While acknowledging the benefits of secular and immanent Buddhism for practitioners, Bodhi interprets those forms of Buddhism more as a “pragmatic program of training *derived from Buddhism*, not as a new and more highly evolved form of the dharma” and warns against a possible Western “subtle cultural arrogance” (172–173). Moreover, he reflects on what a meaningful adaptation of Buddhism in this secular age could mean and how practitioners’ personal approaches (traditional, secular, or immanent) may influence their social action. He concludes with a strong appeal to Buddhist practitioners “to strike a balance between transcendent and socially transformative goals” in the face of the urgency of the global climate crisis, systemic social injustices, and violence (178–183).

In “Buddhism without a View: A Friendly Conversation with Stephen Batchelor’s Secular Buddhism” (185–205), Philippe Turenne engages with Batchelor’s secular interpretation of Buddhism, introducing the reader to some of its characteristics and, more importantly, analyzing how Batchelor establishes his version of secular Buddhism as authentic and original Buddhism in opposition to what Batchelor sums

up monolithically as traditional Buddhism. It is important to note that Turenne starts and ends with a strong appeal for a “friendly dialogue” between secular and traditional Buddhists as a chance to learn from each other. However, he also points out that such dialogue is only possible with an inclusivist and open mindset toward today’s plurality of practices and interpretations of Buddhism (185–186; 201–205). Turenne’s criticism rightly points out three aspects of Batchelor’s positions that seem to make such dialogue difficult: (1) selectively using Western historical academic scholarship and Pāli sources to prove his interpretation, not engaging in proper historical analysis, resulting inevitably in circular logic; (2) equating his interpretation of secular Buddhism with “original” Buddhism, resulting in the exclusion of traditional Buddhism and essentializing his position as normative; and (3) denying traditional Buddhism and Buddhists any potential for contributing to his version of modernity by ignoring the plurality of (post)modernity (194–199).

Turenne’s chapter greatly contributes to this volume by including the Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist traditions and thoroughly engaging with Batchelor’s secular Buddhism. Turenne highlights the problems resulting from using any solidified conceptual binary—here, the equation of modern with progressive/authentic and traditional with basically non-Buddhist. He also draws attention to important aspects of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism that are neglected in Batchelor’s presentation of traditional Buddhism, showing how Batchelor’s critique “targets an artificial, often unfair representation of how certain doctrines and practices are held” (187). An example from my research (Schwerk 2019) demonstrates the importance of Turenne’s critique. I analyzed Bhutan’s pathway to modernity, along with its unique version of secularity and the complex social differentiation processes between the spheres of religion and politics in the form of a specific Buddhist form of governance that unites two branches of governance under a Buddhist king (Tib. *chos srid gnyis ldan/chos srid zung ’jug*) and the policies of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This showed that Buddhist cosmology need not be discarded in (post)modernity and that a *diversity of traditional and secularized forms of Buddhism* co-exist in Bhutan (monastic institutions of the Central Monastic Body of the Drukpa Kagyü school, the Nyingma tradition, Yogic traditions [Tibetan, *sgom chen*], and secularized Buddhist mindfulness practiced in public schools). Batchelor’s perception of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism ignores such realities and contributes to an exclusivist Anglo- or Euro-centric interpretation of Asian Buddhism and non-Western modernities and secularities and the marginalization of diverse Asian Buddhist voices.

Gil Fronsdal reflects in his chapter “Naturalistic Buddhism” (265–284) on his own practice and teaching. He thereby introduces the reader in detail to a form of contemporary Buddhism in the West based on Buddhist teachings that “can be observed in this very life through our natural senses.” He identifies his approach as a “Theravāda form of ‘Naturalistic Buddhism’” that does not require any “beliefs, agency, entities, or experiences that are supernatural,” such as rebirth, psychic powers, or merit and merit transfer, but also does not reject them as untrue, acknowledging their presence in Buddhist scripture. To be accountable to his students and broader audience, Fronsdal locates himself within the Buddhist tradition; he explicitly does not identify his practice with “Secular Buddhism” (266–268; 283). I note that Bodhi associates Fronsdal’s approach roughly with his “immanent Buddhism” (171) and that the essays stand in close conversation with each other. To illustrate his approach, Fronsdal analyzes naturalist tendencies found in early scriptures from the *Sutta Piṭaka* such as the three main themes of “letting go of views, the qualities of a sage, and the training to become a sage” in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (270–275). He also gives us a detailed interpretation of the term *dharma* (278–283). Fronsdal’s chapter is important as a practical example of the secularization of Buddhism in the West characterized by a pluralistic and open approach toward other forms of practicing and interpreting the dharma.

After the diverse contributions of this volume, Richard K. Payne’s “Conscious and Unconscious Dynamics of Secularizing Discourse” (285–314) gives the reader conceptual closure by analyzing crucial dynamics

that consciously or unconsciously underlie the secularizing discourse of Buddhism in the West (mainly North America). He traces the intricate genesis and construction of the polarized rhetoric of the opposites of “Secular Buddhism” and “Traditional Buddhism” (along with the evaluative equation of religious with traditional and immigrant Buddhist practitioners and secular with modern and convert Buddhist practitioners) that is often accompanied by colonialist superiority and truth claims such as a “rhetoric of progress” (286–289). Payne introduces the reader to four key themes that influence North American popular religious culture and have historically Protestant roots: (1) the priesthood of all believers, (2) opposition to ritual, (3) textual fundamentalism, and (4) the quest for the purity of origins. He then demonstrates how—often unconsciously—these themes influence the discourse on secularizing Buddhism (289–297).

Payne also identifies several conscious dynamics in the secularizing discourse: dogmatism and superstition versus empiricism and reason, elitism versus democratic anticlericalism, and conservative versus progressive (297–302). Further, he identifies several values and beliefs important to the secularizing discourse that reproduce underlying cultural presumptions, such as “orientalist disdain” for other ways of practicing Buddhism, perennialism, neoliberal ideology, Buddhist meditative practices as “mental technologies,” and the alleged “inevitability” of secular Buddhism for modern societies (302–310). Payne’s contribution clearly demonstrates the urgency to practically engage in decolonization processes within Western Buddhist groups and Western academia. It shows a path forward, inviting scholars and practitioners alike to critically question how their conscious and unconscious beliefs and values shape their positionality with respect to Buddhism.

Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition brings contributions from various disciplines and fields within and outside of academia into a highly fruitful conversation and goes well beyond the usual focus on Buddhist doctrine or secular mindfulness practices in the discourse about the secularization of Buddhism. It opens up new avenues of critical thinking about secularizing Buddhism in relation to the Buddhist individual practitioner (or scholar) and to society in a global context. However, the particular strength of this collection is that it addresses the urgently needed critical (re)assessment of secularization discourses at large still influenced by class dynamics, Anglo- or Euro-centric perspectives, colonial history and racism, and neoliberalism, appealing to us to listen more carefully to voices that have been silenced and marginalized thus far.

The book’s theoretical contributions add to the current, crucial dialogue between religious studies and social sciences on secularization processes in a global perspective and in other religious contexts in the spirit of the *multiple secularities* approach (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2016, 2020b). The book thus extends to research about Buddhism (and other religions) in post-Soviet nations and societies; the Tibetan Buddhist revival among Han Chinese; the analysis of non-Western knowledge frameworks and social and epistemic structures (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2020a; Wohlrab-Sahr and Kleine 2021); and the decolonization of language through the reassessment of *etic* (mostly English) and *emic* (in the Buddhist context, mostly Asian-language) terminologies.

Lastly, this volume succeeds in its goal not to “promote or to discredit the movement toward a secularized Buddhism” (28) and avoids a normative stance on how (secular or other forms of) Buddhism should be interpreted or practiced in the contemporary world. Instead it appreciates the factually and globally co-existing multitude of perspectives and interpretations by documenting the “instability of ‘Buddhism’” (8), what we also might call the *plurality of Buddhism in the past and present*. The collection addresses both benefits and challenges in secularizing Buddhism over the last centuries in Asia and the West and provides the reader with knowledge and analytical tools to further reflect on their own scholarship and practice. One example of such reflection has been a three-part series on Matthew O’Connell’s “Imperfect Buddha” podcast (<https://imperfectbuddha.com/imperfect-buddha-podcast/>) with Richard K. Payne (August 10,

2021), Stephen Batchelor (December 2, 2021), and Winton Higgins (February 10, 2022). *Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition* is critical in the best sense of the term.

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