

# THE WORK OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE GOSPEL (SPG) IN SRI LANKA (CEYLON)<sup>1</sup>



*This Article is based on the text of an address delivered by the Rev'd Marc Billimoria, Warden of S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia at the public meeting held in 2018 to commemorate the bicentenary of the arrival of the CMS Missionaries in Ceylon*

## INTRODUCTION

The Anglican Communion as it exists today owes much to the various missionary societies that emerged from the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Church of England to take the Gospel and the Church to new lands. Anglican (or more accurately Church of England) presence in the far flung colonies of the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, the Far East, the Middle East, South Asia, Australasia, etc., was due to the combined efforts of early Colonial Chaplains who ministered to the British military and civil services personnel and later of the missionary societies such as the SPCK, SPG, CMS, UMCA and smaller societies such as the Oxford and Cambridge Missions to India and the missionary arms of the Anglican monastic orders (for both men and women) that emerged in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This year the Church of Ceylon celebrates the bicentenary of the arrival of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to the shores of our island in 1818. The CMS was started in 1799 (originally named The Society for Missions to Africa and the East) as a direct result of the Evangelical Revival in the Church of England due to the initiative of the great Anglican Evangelicals like Charles Simeon, William Wilberforce and John Venn

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and its early work was supported by the Clapham Sect (a group of influential Anglican Evangelicals who met at John Venn's Rectory at Clapham). The Evangelicals were on the whole members of the 'Low Church' wing of the Church of England and following the Revival that transformed many parishes in England, Evangelicals of the second generation of the Revival took up the cause of evangelization of the non-Christian people of the colonies as part of their commitment to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel to all the world.

However, the CMS was not the first missionary society to emerge in the Church of England. That honour belongs to the SPCK founded in 1698 and to the SPG founded in 1701. It is the latter that also contributed to the development of Anglicanism in Sri Lanka and the subject of this article.

### **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SPG**

In 1695 the Bishop of London, Henry Compton, appointed a Church of England Presbyter by the name of the Rev Dr Thomas Bray (1658 - 1730) to evaluate the situation of the Church in the new colonies of North America and to help with organizing the parish system in those areas that came under the Diocese of London at the time. Dr Bray's *"recognition of the needs of the church overseas led to the establishment of two societies which were profoundly to affect the development of Anglicanism. Dr Bray and 4 lay members of the Church came together to found the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1698. Its aim was to foster education, the supply of Christian literature and help in the theological formation of ministers. The Society had a significant role in Christian education and diffusion of literature within Britain, but it always had overseas interests. The SPCK's great overseas work lay in the printing of vernacular prayer books and other Christian literature in India...In the eighteenth century, the SPCK also sponsored the missionary work of the Danish Lutherans in South India."* (Kevin Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism*, Cambridge 2006, p 33)

Dr Bray had a great vision for mission and in 1701 he founded a second society, the Venerable Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) that had a far more specific and direct missionary agenda. Bray was granted a Royal Charter by King William III to start the SPG with the primary mandate of sending Church of England priests to provide pastoral care and liturgical leadership to the British settlers in North America and other colonies. Thus began a story that has become part of the history of the Anglican Communion and of the history of the world. It is perhaps a little known fact of history that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, an Anglican Priest, had been one of those early SPG missionaries to North America fulfilling the first primary objective of the SPG, and ministered in Georgia. Two other such pioneers were Samuel Seabury, who was to become the first Bishop to be ordained for the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America, and Charles Inglis of Nova Scotia, the first Church of England Bishop in North America.

The new Society had also a second primary objective: the evangelization of the non-Christian races of the world with whom the British colonizers came into contact. This second primary objective resulted in the SPG starting to work, among other places, in India in 1825 when the Society took over from the SPCK. The SPCK had worked in the sub-continent with the Danish Lutherans before then. To further their evangelistic and missionary goals the SPG was directly responsible for the setting up of colonial dioceses and bishoprics, the first of which was in the West Indies where the Society was actively involved in the anti-slavery movement as well. By the 19th century the SPG was active in Southern Africa, Madagascar, China, Korea, Japan and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon).

Perhaps the most famous SPG missionary of all time was Roland Allen (1868 - 1947) who served in China, India and Africa and who followed the Three-Self Principles of Mission first articulated and advocated by Henry Venn, son of the one of the founders of the CMS and later himself a General Secretary of the CMS from 1841 to 1873. The

three self principles of mission were self-governance (i.e., local indigenous leadership and church government), self-support (i.e., financial independence from the west), and self-propagation (i.e., indigenous missionary work) adapted to local conditions and not merely imitations of the parent Church in England. Thus another characteristic of the SPG is that it strongly advocated the Three-Self Principles and the process of indigenisation. SPG missionaries such as Fr Jack Winslow and Bishop William Lash pioneered indigenisation in the Anglican Church of India, Burma and Ceylon on these principles - resulting in indigenous Christian liturgy, architecture, hymnody and even theology and leadership (Bishop V. S. Azariah of Dornakal becoming the first non-european Anglican Bishop in India in 1912 and Bishop Lakdasa de Mel the first non-european to be consecrated an Anglican Bishop in Sri Lanka in 1945 when the Diocese of Colombo celebrated its centenary).

*As the official SPG website states “SPG has sent personnel to over 50 countries. We sent our first missionaries to India in 1820, South Africa in 1821, China in 1863 and Japan in 1873. In those days, there was a high risk of catching malaria and other diseases, with no effective treatment available, which meant that many of these brave men and women became missionaries knowing that they might be literally giving their lives for the gospel. In 1856, SPG broke with convention by accepting its first single woman as a missionary: Sarah Coombes, who was a schoolteacher in Borneo. At the same time, SPG was making a concerted effort to support indigenous missionaries, both men and women. The focus was on building capacity in the local church – an ethos that we continue to this day.”*

Later developments of the history of the SPG in the 20th century are too numerous to mention in this brief article. Suffice to mention that in 1965 the SPG became the USPG or United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel by merging with the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) that had been formed for evangelistic, social justice, medical and educational mission in East and Central Africa. In 1968 the Cambridge Mission to Delhi also joined the USPG. From November 2012 until 2016,

the name was United Society or Us. In 2016, it was announced that the Society would return to the name USPG, this time standing for United Society Partners in the Gospel from 25 August 2016.

## **THE CHARACTER OF THE SPG**

The SPG from the very first saw itself and understood its role as what Bishop R. S. Copleston of Colombo once declared as *'the true handmaid of the Church.'* He said this due to what he claimed was *"the patent fact that its aim has ever been, to seek the true welfare of the Church rather than her own..."* (F. L. Beven *A History of the Diocese of Colombo*, 1946, p.144) It was based on the 'high church' tradition and 'high church' ideals going back to Richard Hooker, but in a very non-partisan manner and spirit that had very little to do with ritual and ceremonial of liturgy and a lot more to do with a very high view of the Church and of the place of Bishops and the episcopate. It was a much later development that began to identify SPG founded churches with a distinctively Anglo-Catholic liturgical and spiritual ethos. Kevin Ward has offered a very helpful explanation: *"The SPG always set great store on a high doctrine of the church. 'High church' signified an attachment to the church's corporate identity, its three-fold ministry, its ministry of word and sacrament. But 'high church' has come to have another series of meanings within Anglicanism - that representing particular group or party within the church. It was only in the nineteenth century that this more partisan and factional view came to dominate the self understanding of the church. This arose as disputes between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics intensified."* (Ward, p.36)

In his book *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel 1701 - 2000* (London: Continuum, 2000) Daniel O' Connor, a modern historian of the Society writes that the SPG *"included a high view of the Church, of church order and apostolic succession, liturgy and sacraments, exemplified in an early decision that 'no Bibles be sent by the Society into the Plantations without Common Prayer Books bound up with them.'* An important consequence... was the

*understanding that a missionary was answerable to the Church and the bishop to which he was sent, and only secondarily to the Society.*” For the SPG missionary work was synonymous with establishing ecclesiastical institutions whereas for the CMS the two were very distinct roles.

Bishop Colin Buchanan has described the SPG as “*scrupulously Anglican in the sense of seeking to put all church life under the authority of a bishop and taking considerable trouble to raise funds to create and sustain overseas bishoprics for this purpose.*” (Colin Buchanan, *Anglicanism*, Oxford, 2006, p. 417) This ‘high’ view of the episcopate held by the SPG resulted in the Archbishop of Canterbury being invited from the very inception to be the official President of the SPG and every Diocesan Bishop of the Church of England being an ex officio member of its Standing Committee. Its later allegiance to Anglo-Catholicism resulted in the SPG not supporting the various Church Union Schemes in the Indian Sub-Continent over the issue of non-episcopally ordained ministries being accepted.

O’Connor further states that “*accompanying this high ecclesiology was a political theology which saw church an estate intimately associated, two aspects of a single national community.*” (Ward, p. 33). This ‘high’ view of the Church and of the relationship between Church and State ensured that the SPG was able to harness the patronage of the colonial governments in the lands in which the Society was active as it was considered very much a part of the establishment and not an independent missionary society like the CMS. In fact Ward points out that the CMS articulated a very different and indeed a more radical view of the relationship between Church and State: “*If the SPG had tended to blur the boundaries between voluntary society and church, and between church and state, the CMS defined those boundaries much more clearly. The CMS was willing to cooperate with the British government where it was useful to evangelism. But it did not see its work as dependent on British authority overseas.*” (Ward, p. 35).

Despite its allegiance to high church ideals and an overtly Catholic vision the SPG always claimed to be representative of the whole Church and not just a particular 'Church Party'. (W. H. W. Jayasekera, *The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel*, in *The Church of Ceylon: Her Faith and Mission*, ed. by Harold de Soysa, 1945, p. 137)

The SPG from the very first was also committed to theological education and formation and supported the Church's training and formation of the clergy particularly for and in the mission field. One of the best examples of this commitment was the SPG's support given to Bishop Thomas Middleton of Calcutta in the setting up of Bishop's College, Calcutta in 1820. In Sri Lanka too when Bishop James Chapman mooted the idea of a School and College for the training of native clergy the SPG enthusiastically supported his vision and plans and thus began S. Thomas' College about which we will consider details later on in this article.

## **THE SPG IN CEYLON**

While some sources including Margaret Dewey in *The Messengers: United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel* (Mowbray, 1975) record that the SPG arrived in Sri Lanka from India in 1844, according to others, including both Archdeacon F. Lorenz Bevan in *A History of the Diocese of Colombo* (Colombo, 1946) and the Rev'd Percy Wickremesinghe in *After Ninety One Years: A History of the Nugegoda Mission* (Johannine Press, 1940) claim that it was in 1840 with the ministry of the Rev'd E. E. Mooyart (later 6th Archdeacon of Colombo), the first SPG missionary in Colombo from where the mission expanded to other urban centers. The next most famous SPG missionary priest was the Rev'd C. de Alwis who had the pastoral charge of 14 congregations and 30 schools (Wickremesinghe, p.44). It is clear that unlike the CMS that penetrated many remote villages the SPG was more urbanized in its involvement. From 1840 to 1930 the SPG at different times worked in many of the major urban area of the island as will be described in due course.

Anglicans in Sri Lanka had come under the episcopal care of the Bishop of London from 1798 to 1814. Following the formation of the Diocese of Calcutta in 1813 the Anglican community in Sri Lanka came under care of the Bishop of Calcutta and an Archdeaconry of that diocese was created for Colombo in 1818. In 1834 we became part of the Diocese of Madras. As already mentioned, the SPG had started to function in India in 1820 having taken over from the SPCK.

It is perhaps important to note in this context that up to the beginning of the eighteenth century no Reformed Churches had yet officially sent missionaries to India. It was King Frederick Christian IV of Denmark who first discerned the call to send the Gospel of Christ to India and he sponsored missionaries of the Lutheran Church to start work in the small Danish Settlement at Tranquebar on the south coast of Madras. The SPCK began to support the work of the Danish Lutheran Mission in 1710. The most famous of those missionaries was Frederick Christian Schwartz, due to whose ministry a Ceylonese Tamil Christian named Christian David was trained to become the first Tamil Proponent (as Diocesan Catechists or Lay Preachers were called at that time) in the island. David was later ordained by Bishop Reginal Heber after having been trained at Bishop's College in Calcutta despite initial opposition over his supposed lack of proper credentials. Although an SPCK Catechist initially, having been trained by the SPG at Bishop's College, the Rev'd Christian David could well be considered the first SPG clergyman to serve in the island long before the recorded arrival of the SPG here.

In November 1845 when the Rt Rev'd James Chapman was appointed the 1st Bishop of the newly created Diocese of Colombo it was the SPG that supported the new Bishop's plans to set up the infrastructure of the new Diocese.

The SPG, as already explained, was always very much a part of the institutional Church unlike the CMS that jealously guarded its independence as a mission society free of ecclesiastical control. The SPG's very 'High' view of ecclesiology in Sri Lanka



was a huge contrast to the ‘Low’ view of ecclesiology of the CMS on the other hand that was more strongly aligned to the more Evangelical ‘Low Church’ party that did not accept the ‘high’ view of the Church that the SPG held. As Kevin Ward has written: *“It was not the CMS’ intention to conflict with the SPG. It also supported the established church - but, as John Venn said, ‘it was founded on the church principle’, not the ‘high church principle.’”* (Ward, p 35) Consequently, as in other part of the world, the SPG was very loyal to the episcopate of the Church of Ceylon whereas the CMS was always very wary of the Bishops at the best of times and open conflict between the Bishop and the missionaries was inevitable as the famous CMS Controversy of Ceylon of the 1870s proved. Having entered the island in 1818 the CMS had functioned without any major issues during the episcopates of the first three Bishops of Colombo (James Chapman, Piers C. Claughton, and Hugh W. Jermyn), although the missionaries boycotted Bishop P. C. Claughton’s Synod of 1862 on the grounds that it was illegal for the Bishop to have summoned them to such a Synod. It was during the time of Bishop Reginald S Copleston, who was very much a high churchman who supported the SPG and was in turn supported by them, that matters reached a head. The CMS Missionaries openly refused to accept the authority of the Diocesan Bishop because they considered that he held views about the Eucharist and Church authority such as synodical government that they were not able to accept or subscribe to. The Ceylon CMS Controversy was on the agenda of the 1878 Lambeth Conference as a basis for discussion on the relationship between Diocesan Bishops and missionaries working in their dioceses belonging to independent missionary societies.

Going back to the foundation of the diocese of Colombo in 1845 it was the SPG (and the SPCK) that helped Bishop Chapman found and set up S. Thomas’ College in Mutwal in 1851 and to build his Cathedral Church of Christ in 1854. Bishop Chapman was delighted when the SPG agreed to help him start the School and College having appealed to them thus: *“In aiding the first formation of an institution which is to become the nursery of a national Church, you are sowing the seed which is to become*

*not only an abiding but an increasing blessing.*” Beven records that the SPG “accepted the Trusteeship of the College and gave 1,000 pounds for its endowment and an annual grant which continued for many years; the SPCK voted 2000 pounds, and when the Bishop found himself able to acquire nine acres of land in a suitable site at Mutwal, the College was built and opened in 1851.” (Beven, p. 133) The Rev’d W. H. W. Jayasekera writing in an article on the work of the SPG in in the book *The Church of Ceylon: Her Faith and Mission* edited by Bishop Harold de Soysa in 1945 has written, “a good part of the history of the work of the Diocese is the history of the College and the history of the work of the SPG in Ceylon.” (p. 138) In point of fact S. Thomas’ College was the property of the SPG from 1851 to at least 1930. It is also interesting to note that the relationship between the Bishop of the Diocese as Visitor to the College, the SPG and the College was such that the choice of the early Wardens of the College was that of the SPG at the request of the Bishop. When Bishop Chapman left the scene of his labours in 1861 and returned to England he left the affairs of the College firmly in the hands of the SPG and his successors continued to take the advice of the SPG on College matters receiving very generous contributions and donations from the SPG for its work. In 1930 when the SPG withdrew from Sri Lanka and the Board of Governors of S. Thomas’ College was set up with Bishop M. R. Carpenter Garnier as the first Chairman, the SPG renounced all its rights to the College in favour of the newly constituted Board. However, the Rules and Constitution of the Board, that require 80% of its membership to be Anglican Christian, also require that one of the members must always be nominated by the SPG - to date this requirement is still met although it is now the Bishop who nominates rather than the Society.

Apart from S. Thomas’ College the SPG also had many other mission involvements in other major towns of the island as has been mentioned.

In north Colombo there was the faithful ministry of the Rev’d C. Devasagayam at Cayman’s Gate and the Leprosy Hospital while the SPG also supported the ministry of the first Sinhalese Colonial Chaplain, Canon Samuel W. Dias, who served as

Superintendent of the SPG Mission at Dematagoda in 1869 and whose name is immortalised in the first classical Sinhala translation of the Book of Common Prayer.

In Polwatte, Thimbirigasyaya, Milagiriya and Galkissa (today's Dehiwela - Mount Lavinia) the Rev'd James Thurstan ministered as an SPG missionary while the Rev'd Cornelius Senanayake was active in Moratuwa and Panadura where there were growing Sinhalese congregations. Beven records that Holy Emmanuel Church in Moratuwa was a centre of a flourishing community that was influenced by the SPG. (Beven, p.136)

In the southern province the SPG selected Buona Vista in Galle where the Rev'd Philip Marks served for many years setting up an SPG School, a Church, and even an Orphanage that all later became part of the Galle Parish. It must be noted that the first ever Deaconess to be licensed in the Diocese of Colombo, a Miss Townsend, was from the SPG and served at the Buona Vista Orphanage until her death. The SPG also founded schools in Weligama, Matara and Tangalle where the Rev'd C. A. W. Jayasekera, the Rev'd S. D. J. Ondatjie, the Rev'd F. D Edrisinghe and the Rev'd J. F. De Mel served. The SPG set up an industrial school in Matara and a training school and it was in Matara that the famous SPG missionaries the Rev'd James Stephenson Lyle and the Rev'd William Henley served. The Rev'd F. H. de Winton (later Archdeacon of Colombo) served as the SPG missionary at the Kalutara mission station where there was also a well-known parish school.

In Dandugama the SPG founded and endowed some of its famous educational and industrial centers including the two parish churches of St. Mark at Dandugama and St. Philip at Kurana where the famous Rev'd A. E. Becket and the Rev'd T. Christian served. The Kurana-Katunayake and Dandugama parishes formed the Dandugama Mission which came to be seen as one of the most successful SPG mission centres in the island.

In Calpenty (today's Kalpitiya) and Puttalam the Rev'd S. Nicholas was resident missionary for a number of years while the Rev'd J. C. Arndt served at Mannar. The Kalpitiya Mission church was built in 1842 on the site of a much older Portuguese Roman Catholic Church. In Chilaw the Rev'd C. C. P. Arulpragasam deputised for the SPG in a mission area that has been described as "*a true child of the SPG*" (Beven, p139) from which other mission stations emerged such as Merawela, Maradankulama, Bingiriya, Madame and Hettipola.

On the east coast the Rev'd S. O Glennie (later 7th Archdeacon of Colombo) served at Trincomalee while the Rev'd A Vethecan ministered at Batticaloa and the Rev'd John Wise (later 5th Archdeacon of Colombo), the Rev'd H. H. Von Dadelszen and the Rev'd E. Labrooy served in Ramboda, Nuwara Eliya and Kandy respectively. In Matale there was the ministry of the Rev'd Walter Herat and in Badulla that of the Rev'd G. G. Gomes.

Dr R. L. Hayman and Mr W. T. Keble were originally sent to S. Thomas' College Mount Lavinia through the SPG with Warden Kenneth C. McPherson, who was also of the SPG and who went from S. Thomas' to serve as Archdeacon of Bombay. Hayman and Keble were pioneers in the field of education and the branch schools of S. Thomas' in Gurutalawa, Kollupitiya and Bandarawela are a testament to their labours.

One of the lasting legacies of the SPG in Sri Lanka is also that of the Steuart Trust that began life as the Steuart Fund Property, the bequest in 1863 of Mr James Steuart to the Bishop of Colombo for the specific purpose of assisting the work and mission of the SPG in the island. This was one of many sizeable bequests made to the Diocese for the purpose of the work of the SPG. Here again unlike in the case of bequests made to the CMS that were vested with The Church Missionary Trust Association Ltd, a body outside the authority and control of the Diocesan Bishop, all properties and trusts bequeathed to the Diocese in the name of the SPG were always vested directly with

the Diocese from the outset which is what made the transfer in 1930 from the SPG to the Diocese so smooth.

In keeping with the SPG's advocacy of indigenisation many Anglican clergy who were influenced by the SPG way of thinking advocated the same principles and there was in the 1920s and 1930s a flourishing of indigenisation in the Church of Ceylon led by pioneers such as Lakdasa de Mel, interestingly and ironically at Christ Church, a CMS centre in Baddegama where Robert Mayor and his colleagues had set up the first CMS mission station in 1818. There is no doubt that almost all those clergy involved in demanding an indigenous liturgy that resulted in the ground breaking Ceylon Liturgy of 1938 were influenced by SPG principles.

It was as early as 1848 that a local Committee of the SPG was formed in Colombo to advise and support the Society in London with their work in Sri Lanka. This was due to the philosophy of the SPG that the local Church should be actively involved in the life the work of the missionaries.

This thinking also influenced the work of the SPG in the training and formation of local missionaries and clergy. As Wickremesinghe states *“At all times the missionaries of this Society worked very unitedly with the Diocesans and the Diocese as a whole. They were at all times willing to accept the services of the local clergy, and gave them responsibility, for they had the utmost confidence in their ability and capacity. On the other hand, the Church Missionary Society appointed their first Ceylonese Superintending Missionary only in 1918, after nearly 100 years.”* (Wickremesinghe, p. 45-46)

The SPG as has been clearly stated above was very much for the process of diocesanization rather more strongly than the CMS and thus they were the first to hand over their few mission stations and churches to the Diocese the Colombo. Based on

the Society's advocacy of the 'Three-Self Principle' the SPG supported Bishop R. S. Copleston's initiative of disestablishing the Diocese of Colombo on 8th July 1885 together with the setting up of synodical church government with the formation of the Diocesan Synod in which Bishop, clergy and laity came together to decide the future direction of the Diocese. The SPG endorsed this move by contributing a sum of no less than 2500 pounds to be used as a permanent endowment of the Diocese of Colombo. In effect what disestablishment meant was that the Diocese of Colombo, though ecclesiastically under the metropolitanical care of the Bishop of Calcutta became free of state control. Subsequently, when the Diocese of Colombo 'came of age' and took its place as the Church of Ceylon within the new Province of India, Burma and Ceylon on 1st March 1930 the SPG officially withdrew from active involvement in Sri Lanka having accomplished its task of helping to set up an autonomous national Church. The Society has however, continued to support the work of the Church of Ceylon and its two dioceses through different means to date.

The Church of Ceylon owes a great debt to the SPG - not just for the beautiful churches it helped to build, for the institutions it helped to found, many of which sadly are not part of the Church anymore, but also for the example of the loyalty with which they served six successive Bishops of the Diocese of Colombo true to the high ideals and Catholic convictions of the Society on Church order and episcopacy.

As Beven writes, *"The more we know of the SPG the more we shall appreciate the dignity and beauty of its work. It has helped to build up, in this Island home of ours, the Universal Church of Jesus Christ in all its glorious completeness. And to day we look back across the years and give thanks to God for the faithful witness of a countless host of men and women, some known and some not known, a great cloud of witnesses which no man can number, who have prayed and laboured, spent and been spent, that they might carry out their marching orders, to preach the Gospel to every creature, and to make disciples of all nations."* (Beven, p.145)

Bishop James Chapman in a sermon preached on St. Thomas' Day, 21st December 1849, when he laid the foundation stone for the first SPG institution, S. Thomas' College at Mutwal, said "*Enduring works are often of humble beginnings...*" This is no less true of the part played by the SPG in laying the foundation of Anglicanism in Sri Lanka for which we give thanks even as we give thanks for the work of the CMS that began 200 years ago.

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