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Understanding Faith-based Organisations: How FBOs are contrasted with NGOs in International Development Literature

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Abstract
Organisations with a faith basis play a prominent, sometimes dominant, role within the development sector. In the latter half of the 20th century, many faith-based organisations (FBOs) - motivated by their religious faith and beliefs - began to work beyond their own borders to improve the material well-being of the world’s poor. However, despite the significant presence of FBOs within the arena of aid and development, little agreement exists within the development literature as to the similarity or distinction between aid agencies that are faith-based and secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Drawing on approximately fifty studies, this paper reviews the existing literature on FBOs in order to analyse how FBOs are understood in relation to NGOs. This paper then suggests a number of different typologies that captures this diverse range of views of how FBOs are understood.

Keywords
Faith based organisations, non-governmental organisations, religion, development

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Introduction
While religious groups are generally primarily concerned with the spiritual well-being of their members, many have also long been interested in addressing the physical well-being of their communities as well. Indeed, for many this has often been a core aspect of their existence (see for example, Hovland 2008). This concern with physical well-being is often experienced and delivered through faith-based organisations (FBOs) affiliated with religious communities (see work by Clarke 2008, Clarke and Jennings 2008, Clarke et al. 2011, Harb 2008). Clarke (2006) suggests these agencies can in fact be considered forerunners to modern NGOs as they have been providing support for the poor for a very long time.

Yet, for decades FBOs were ignored in mainstream discussions of community development (Willis 2013). This could be partly explained by FBOs being embedded within communities and being less external agents and more ‘organic’ to the community. It could also be explained by FBOs choosing to position themselves outside the development sector and remaining more closely aligned with the religious body to which they are affiliated. However, FBOs have begun to initiate contact with aid donors in recent years to seek increased involvement (and funding) in community development interventions. Over the past decade a number of international forums have been developed that have brought together FBOs and large international donors to explore how to leverage the experience and expertise that both groups can bring to improving the lives of the poor. Though recently wound-up, one example is the World Faiths Development Dialogue which originated in 1999 and grew out of discussions between the World Bank and a range of religious leaders on religious organisations’ involvement in providing for the needs of the poor (Marshall and Van Saanen 2007, p.8).

As we have noted elsewhere (e.g. Clarke 2011, Marshall and Van Saanen (2007) also observe that FBOs are now seeking involvement and influence in policy debates and seeking support to scale up a range of social justice initiatives. Donors and researchers alike are also now realising that FBOs can play a legitimate role in civil society, as well as having greater access – in some instances – to local communities. Therefore the exclusion of FBOs from community development work is now diminishing. Yet understanding FBOs and their place in the development sector remains relatively under-researched.

In the last ten years or so, there has been a great upsurge in the number of major research projects and single studies which explore the role of religion and religious organisations in international development. Despite this upsurge in interest, and a large number of studies which attempt to define the nature, role and development outcomes emanating from FBOs (e.g. Clarke 2006, 2007), the literature remains divided as to how to classify the structures of FBOs, their activities and their characteristics. This paper therefore contributes to current debates by analysing the range of ways in which FBOs are described in the literature, and by assessing the efficacy and usefulness of these typologies. It reviews approximately fifty studies that contrasted and compared NGO and FBOs. It finds that there are six broad categories in the literature, ranging from FBOs being considered in all substantive matters as being the same as NGOs to being considered entirely incomparable – with a range of relationships in between. In light of this review a final typology will be proposed which suggests that understanding FBOs is perhaps best done by considering the range of its constitutive identities, including that of NGOs.
Methodology
To assess the ways in which FBOs are understood in the literature, the authors conducted an iterative search of literature which compares FBOs to NGOs, utilising a range of academic databases and well-known websites (e.g. the Religions and Development Research Programme based at the University of Birmingham. Approximately 85 studies were identified, including books, academic journal articles and grey literature. A modified realist synthesis method was used to select and analyse the literature (Pawson 2006). Realist synthesis is somewhat similar to conducting a systematic literature review. However, it differs in one important dimension: rather than reading every last study available on a topic, this method aims to help the researcher work more efficiently by only reading sufficient studies to reach ‘saturation’ – i.e. the point at which new studies are not providing any additional findings or theory on a given area of the research question. Then the researcher moves on to the next question or area of exploration.

Of the original 85 studies initially identified as potentially pertinent, 50 studies were selected for close analysis. These were selected on the basis of quality, relevance (i.e. they specifically explore the nature of FBOs, particularly in relation to NGOs), and contribution of new theory or ideas. Generally, studies were limited to those published in the period 2000-2013, with older studies only being included where there is a gap in later literature.

It is important to note, therefore, that not every study ever published on NGOs, or even on FBOs, has been included in this review. We chose to confine our search and subsequent analysis of literature to studies which already compare FBOs and NGOs in order to contain our task. There is a vast literature on NGOs, and a comprehensive review of this would not have been feasible. Also, the non-inclusion of some studies in this paper should not necessarily be interpreted as an assessment of lack of quality. Many high quality studies were excluded from this review because they were not directly relevant to our research questions.

This paper is set out as follows. This first section has introduced the paper. The next two sections discuss the importance of religion and religious organisations in development, and then define faith-based definitions. Following this is a presentation of the six typologies commonly used to characterise the relationship between NGOs and FBOs found within the development literature, before a seventh approach to understanding how FBOs relate to NGOs is introduced. A final section draws some conclusions from this analysis.

The importance of religion in the study of development
With eighty per cent of the world’s population professing religious faith, religion can be considered a common human characteristic. Faith is widely understood as the acceptance of some ultimate reality beyond this realm and that achieving the highest level of well-being requires us to have insight into or right relationship with this unseen order (James 1902). Religious belief is relevant to both social and private realms because in addition to the worship of a deity, it also involves belief in ‘a revealed scripture, a divinely ordained code of laws, and an assortment of institutions and communal structures in which the religion is observed’ (Segal 2009, p. 4). Religion therefore provides a meaning for existence through which adherents interpret their own circumstances and make decisions on how to act and interact within wider society based on religious teachings.
This religious teaching also contains precepts on how to live a righteous life, including responding to those that are materially poor. This provides an important resource for addressing poverty: over one billion of the world’s population live in poverty and exist on less than US$1 a day (and nearly 3 billion live on less than US$2 a day), more than one billion people around the globe do not have access to safe water, 115 million children do not attend primary school and 10 million children die each year of preventable illness (World Bank, 2010).

Efforts to address poverty are not new, with religious groups and individuals motivated by religious charity having provided material care and comfort for those in need for millennia. Religious groups have long provided education and health facilities in both their home countries but some also in foreign countries - often long before nation-states provided such institutions (see Williams 1972, Duggan 1983, Hassell 1989, Gardner 2006; 2008, Wetherell 2005).

Much of the desire to improve the material living standards of the poor is operationalised through secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs). NGOs and FBOs have much in common. Not only do they often have a shared genesis, they also regularly work closely with one another. They also seek to serve common communities. However, there is a perception within much of the literature that FBOs and NGOs are distinct entities¹. This distinctiveness though is not clear. Despite the significant presence of FBOs within the arena of aid and development, little agreement exists within the development literature as to the similarity or distinction between aid agencies that are faith-based and aid agencies that are secular.

**Faith based organisations**

Whilst the existence of organisations with religious affiliations working to improve the well-being of the disadvantaged is not necessarily recent, the term faith-based organisation is relatively recent and has been coined to distinguish those organisations that are ‘sectarian’ in nature (James 2009). Whilst, FBOs share the same basic characteristics as ‘secular’ NGOs: independence, being not-for-profit, voluntary, and altruistic (Ball and Dunn 1996), they are distinguished through their affiliation with a religious structure, doctrine or community. As with many concepts and terms within development (see Cornwall 2007), it is therefore not surprising that a precise definition of ‘faith-based organisations’ does not exist.

Vidal (2001) identifies three styles of faith-based organisations within a United States domestic setting of welfare service provision: 1) congregations affiliated with a physical structure of worship or geographical grouping of worshippers; 2) national networks of congregations, including national denominations and their social services affiliates, as well as other networks of related organisations, such as the YMCA and YWCA; and 3) unaligned or freestanding religious organisations that are incorporated separately from congregations and national networks.

The specific nature of working in the development sector is not clearly captured using Vidal’s three typologies. Therefore it is necessary that different styles of faith-based international development agencies be developed. As a starting point the following four types are proposed: 1) FBOs directly linked to a local congregation or religious leader; 2) FBOs directly linked to a religious denomination / sect / branch and are formally incorporated within the institutional organisation of that religious body; 3) FBOs directly linked to a religious denomination / sect / branch but are incorporated

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¹ This distinction is often most sharply made by NGOs and FBOs themselves who use it to attract interest within the marketplace with regards to fundraising.
separately from that religious body; and 4) FBOs that self-identify themselves as falling within a broad religious tradition from which they draw their motivation. NGOs often trade off credibility with clients and broader social acceptance. For example, broad-based public charities have large constituencies drawn from the general public and are therefore likely to have objectives in broad conformity with the general public interest. In contrast, NGOs closely aligned to its members are likely to have high credibility with these clients, but not attract wider social support (World Bank 1999). So whilst other NGOs may have to trade off credibility with clients for wider population support, FBOs can simultaneously achieve high support with both as they are visible at both the local level working with target groups, but also because they may form part of the social mores upon which the wider society is based – presuming, of course, that the FBO is of the religious majority for that particular country or region.

Comparing FBOs to NGOs
Organisations with a faith-based play a prominent, sometimes dominant, role within the non-government development sector. However, despite the significant presence of FBOs within the arena of aid and development, little agreement exists within the development literature as to the similarity or distinction between aid agencies that are faith-based and secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs). There are a number of ways in which FBOs are classified in the literature, in relation to these secular non-governmental organisations (Clarke 2010). The rest of this section provides an overview of 7 typologies of FBOs. These have emerged from the literature, indicating a broad range of ways in which other scholars have attempted to define and categorise these organisations, as compared to secular development NGOs.

Intersection
The first manner in which FBOs are often compared to NGOs in the FBO literature are as organisations that sit within the intersection of NGOs and religious organisations – that is, these FBOs can be both classified as NGOs because of the work in which they are engaged, but also be classified religious organisations due to their faith-based identity. The consequence of this dual identity is that these organisations are quite distinct from both solely secular development focussed NGOs and solely non-development sectarian organisations. By drawing on these two identities, the effectiveness of these FBOs is enhanced (Nishimuko 2008, Haynes 2009).

For many years, FBOs have played major roles in society, delivering a variety of services to the public, such as caring for the infirm and elderly, advocating justice for the oppressed and playing a major role in humanitarian aid and international development efforts. In this context they are perhaps closer in terms of organisational set up, structure and administration to other 20th century civil society organisations than to more traditional and historic religious organisations (Religions And Development Program 2010).

In this sense, FBOs have two identities. The first is as a development agency seeking to improve the material well-being of the poor, while the second is that of a religious organisation whose existence is forged from a faith basis and its understanding of religious tenets (Lloyd 2007). The Berkley Centre (2010) describes a number of these agencies with feet in both camps operating to building peace in Mozambique. The common factor being that they each are firmly rooted in their religious identity but committed to operating within the development sector. But as James (2009) notes one ‘factor that sets church development agencies apart from other NGOs is their faith and the links between their beliefs and the development work. Historically, faith has been the motivation behind
much relief and development work amongst the poor. Faith can also influence the methods used to implement the development work, such as the use of prayer (p. 4).

1. Intersection

The development work being undertaken by FBOS understood within this typology is also infused or informed by the religious teachings. As Flannigan identifies, this dual citizenship or intersection approach can be found in FBOs of all faiths, including not just Christian, but also Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim organisations (also see Jaffrelot 2008, Lunn 2009). This typology recognises that while NGOs and religious organisations are distinct, that a number of organisations (FBOs in this instance) do straddle both worlds. The point of distinction between FBOs and NGOs in this typology is the religious basis that give rise to the FBOs development motivation. This typology does not make clear, however, whether there are clear distinctive approaches to development program implementation within communities.

Distinct
The second manner in which they are sometimes conceived is completely distinct and separate from NGOs. Whilst they may undertake similar activities and share much of the same ‘DNA’, it is precisely their religiosity that makes them incomparable to NGOs. This religious motivation that underscores their existence is sufficiently differentiated from NGOs to render them completely distinct entities. As James (2009b) puts it, ‘Church-based development organisations are distinct from secular NGOs. They have particular organisational features. These are the source of their potential value added, but also their major challenges’ (p. 2).

In this sense, the work that FBOs undertake is substantially different to NGOs as it is informed by religious principles and teachings that if not incompatible with the underpinnings of development activities undertaken by secular NGOs are at least sufficiently differentiated to resulted in a distinct development approach. This alternative approach is largely based on ‘alternative development values’ (Olson 2008, p. 394). This distinction may not be entirely surprising as world views are in part shaped by religious beliefs (Tiramano 2010, Clarke 2007).
Clarke (2006) puts forward three types of FBOs that fall into this *distinct from* category. The first are apex bodies or faith-based representative organisations. These FBOs are shaped by doctrinal authority. The second are faith-based organisations that focus on socio-religious goals such as mobilising social groups to achieve political objectives, or to unify disparate ethnic groups on the basis of faith identities. Unlike NGOs, one of the characteristics of this type of FBO is their influence over ‘the design and implementation of public policy through covert networking among elite social groups’ (p. 843). The final type of FBO that is distinct to NGOs are those that engage in illegal and sometime violent activities, justified and promoted on the basis of particular beliefs. These groups are common to all faith traditions and tend to grow out of ‘religious nationalism directed against other religious communities..... and conservative religious politics ...directed against secularists or enemies within the faith traditions’ (p. 844). Their distinction is reinforced by an unwillingness to participate in broad based partnerships because of religious intolerance (see for example Kroessin and Mohamed (2008)). Of course, the intensity of this intolerance does vary greatly between FBOs (De Cordier 2009).

*Substitutive*

The third manner in which FBOs are sometimes conceived sits in binary opposition to this previous approach. The value of this typology is that is does away with looking for differences and focuses on the similarities and primarily the purpose of the FBO which is to respond to the humanitarian imperative. In this understanding the religious motivation is irrelevant because there is no empirical evidence base to suggest a distinction in their impact when working with local communities. Therefore in this sense they are effectively the same as NGOs and can quite rightly be described as NGOs themselves – in more plain language, they are interchangeable.
Berger (2003) suggests that whilst the methods and activities undertaken to achieve certain goals, for example, *social capital* may differ, these are simply processes and therefore not substantive when considering shared goals. Characterised by missions rooted in religious and spiritual beliefs, RNGOs (religious NGOs) rely on a variety of processes by means of which to reach their goals. Processes such as network building, advocacy, monitoring, and information provision (propaganda) are common to most NGOs whereas others including spiritual guidance, prayer, and modelling are a unique feature of RNGO operations. All NGOs encourage the creation of networks—local, regional, national, and international bases of support and information by means of which collaborative, targeted action is undertaken (p. 29-30).

When one considers nearly half of all health, for example, in Africa is delivered by FBOs (Marshall 2005), this very critical mass means that they cannot operate distinctly at all from NGOs as their core business is largely identical. Given that many secular NGOs grew out of FBOs (Marshall 2005), it also not unsurprising that the operational work they do is largely similar. However, the failure of this typology is that it does not give weight to the motivation of FBOs doing this development work. It does not show the differences in value sets, motivations, linkages to communities and broader networks that FBOs have in contrast with secular NGOs. This difference is values, while perhaps not obvious in program implementation can be, though, an important point of distinction between NGOs and FBOs.

**Subset**

A fourth understanding of the difference between NGOs and FBOs is to consider FBOs a subset of NGOs in the sense that the term NGO is quite broad and includes an array of organisations that are non-governmental and that FBOs are one such grouping of organisations (Audet et al 2013; Thomas 2004). Within this understanding, the term NGO is used to describe a whole range of organisations that work to improve the lives of the poor but there is such a range of these types of organisations that to just distinguish between those that are faith-based and those that are not over-states the homogeneity of these secular aid agencies. Within the aid sector, there is a large array of categories in

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2 *Religious Non-Government Organisations* (RNGOs) are roughly equivalent in the literature to Faith-Based Organisations with the principle difference being that RNGOs is a more formal term used to refer to FBOs with significant involvement in UN policy development and advocacy activities.
which NGOs can be placed other than just religious motivation. NGOs can be identified by their partnership arrangements, geographical locale, transnational presence, budget, fundraising approach, development goals, political orientation, and so forth. The advantage of this typology highlights the similarities in structures, functions, etc., as well as the fact that many in both secular and religious NGOs have a faith motivation for what they do (Leurs 2012). However, the model does fall short in not embodying the differing relationships FBOs have with donor and recipient communities, compared to secular NGOs

4. Subset

McDui-ra and Rees (2010, p.24-5), for example distinguish NGOs (including FBOs) within civil society by their ability to gain access to the development decision-makers. They distinguish between three types of FBOs:

(i) The first group '...are formalised civil society organisations based in the North that have access to institutions where the development agenda is set and negotiated, particularly IFIs and United Nations agencies' (p.24). They utilise partnerships with local agencies in the South to implement their programs '...and their professional development expertise gives them disproportionate power over their Southern partners' (p.24).

(ii) The second group '...are formalised civil society organisations from the South that work in partnership with Northern organisations, IFIs and often their own national governments' (p.24). They often are required to relinquish autonomy in exchange for finance and other resources, and also ensure that their approach aligns with that of their international partners (p.24-5).

(iii) The third group '...are local civil society actors [in the South] that are more deeply involved in communities at the grassroots. The types of civil society actors funded through IFIs and operational agencies are generally those more able to present themselves as more professionalised which potentially marginalises smaller and less professionalised actors' (p.25). This group have less access to national and international funding for development activities, but '...are perceived as having a better understanding of development needs, have more sustainable solutions to development needs, have more sustainable solutions to development

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3 i.e. International Financial Institutions, such as the World Bank.
problems and are able to utilise knowledge that is otherwise marginalised by Northern expertise’ (p.25).

As the NGO sector therefore is more heterogeneous than homogenous, a binary distinction based on faith motivation is somewhat artificial and does not capture the complex nature of civil society with competing priorities, networks, aspirations and agendas.

**Co-existing**

This is slightly different to the fifth manner in which to understand FBOs and they are sometimes described as FBOs co-existing with NGOs. In this way of understanding, FBOs are given equal weighting with NGOs as key stakeholders within civil society each playing important but distinct roles in holding the state and market to account. Certainly this typology acknowledges the role that religious organisations have in society but does not provide for these organisations being distinctive in any manner from civil society. In this sense it equates religious organisations alongside all other civil society groupings.

**5. Co-existing**

A distinction of this typology is that it places FBOs on a more equal footing with NGOs within the larger civil society field (Green et al 2012; Vander Zaag 2013). This means that FBOs are not understood as a subgroup of NGOs but have a legitimate and equal right to exist and make claims on resources, etc. As Boehle (2010) notes, there are 'a variety of religious actors' involved in the development sphere, both 'local and international religious communities long-established religious non-governmental organisations (RNGOs), as well as inter-religious organisations and initiatives' (p.275). Of particular importance is their involvement in civil society:

Often these religious communities and organisations are in alliances that cross traditional boundaries, engage with secular and political organisations and are a part of what is frequently described as the emerging global civil society (Boehle 2010, p. 275).

As part of the development of the MDGs, the UN general assembly saw FBOs as an important vehicle for mobilising the global community to action. They are seen to have the ability to
...galvanis[e] the moral commitment on which the MDGs depend and in popularising them in local churches, mosques, temples and synagogues, translating them into the idioms of the faith and mobilising support for organisations and community initiatives that contribute to the Goals (Clarke 2007, p. 80).

However, FBOs are also seen to play a role outside their own faith boundaries. FBOs are viewed as key participants in civil society, active across a variety of development-related fields including conflict resolution and reconciliation; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; environmental protection and conservation; politics and social movements; and social welfare and development (Lunn 2009, p. 943). Moreover, FBOs play a very significant role in the provision of social services, often on behalf of Governments unable to establish the trust and relations required to engage in difficult communities (see Clarke et al. 2011, Nishimuko 2008).

Atomistic Grouping
A sixth manner in which FBOs might be understood is an atomistic group of many individual and distinct organisations that have many differences but a common faith-based premise. This approach accounts for the marked differences between FBOs that are small micro-agencies located at a congregational level as well as international aid agencies operating transnational partnerships (Boehle 2010). As James (2009a) notes,

FBOs are extraordinarily heterogeneous in the ways in which their faith identity plays out in their work. FBOs are products of completely different world faiths. Even within each faith there exist highly diverse strains... The organisational forms of these FBOs are distinct again (p. 4-5, see also Bradley 2009 for a range of distinct types of FBOs).

In this sense, lumping all these varying organisations together under a single label is slightly misleading as it implies a homogeneity across a range of issues that does not exist.

6. Atomistic Grouping

Another interesting aspect captured within this typology is the nature of culture and religious interpretation that affects how FBOs operate within the development sector. For example, ‘research reveals that the organisational behaviour of Islamic FBOs is not predictable on the basis of religion alone and depends upon interpretations of religion, which in turn are influenced by the cultural and
educational background of an organisation’s leadership’ (Siddiq 2009, p. 2). Thus even within FBOs sharing the same faith, there can be wide distinctions in how each FBO can operationalise this faith.

A New Way: Constitutive
Having considered how FBOs are contrasted with NGOs within the literature, we propose a seventh model which may integrate all the others and better reflect the distinctiveness that FBOs might be understood as having in relation to NGOs. FBOs are constitutive of a number of bodies that are involved in development activities. FBOs can claim heritage and relationship to NGOs, religious organisations, civil society organisations and communities. In this sense they are somewhat creatures with a ‘Frankenstein’ nature – distinctive and existing in their own right, but drawing on aspects and parts of other stakeholders. In this sense, FBOs are distinct from NGOs, but containing elements of NGOs within them.

Many FBOs, for example, are part of wider structures through which resources are channelled. They operate at every level of society and are present in every community; in particular they have unrivalled rural reach and are grounded in some of the world’s most troubled areas. This representation on the ground makes for effective distribution systems, particularly in times of emergency or disaster. In terms of motivation… (FBOs) stand out because of their commitment to and zeal for serving people and communities (Lunn 2009, p. 944). Lunn argues that they are perceived as being more trustworthy than governments, more sensitive to the local context (i.e. in war zones or catastrophes), and having a deeper commitment to the community.

7.CTstitutive
By drawing on a range of heritages and holding membership within different areas of society, FBOs are a unique amalgam working within the development sector to improve the lives of the poor. This approach

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that FBOs are becoming increasingly visible within the development sector as their contemporary and historic presence becomes more apparent. It is also evident that as major aid agencies seek to engage with more diverse partners that increasing aid funds will be available to FBOs. Whether Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or of some other religious faith, it is important that donors better understand who and what these agencies are. Improving the lives of the poor is a complex undertaking (see for instance Sachs 2005, Stiglitz 2007 and Easterly 2002 for diverging views of its success and failure). It is therefore tempting to look for the quick ‘solution’. There is some risk that some may see the ‘discovery’ of religion as an antidote for global poverty. It is not the purpose of this article to present such a claim. Certainly proponents of FBOs as development actors should also be wary of such a claim. Understanding how FBOs operate though in contrast to NGOs can result in more effective and efficient operations of both these important civil society stakeholders.

This paper has demonstrated that within the development studies literature there is some confusion has to the nature and make-up of FBOs when contrasted to NGOs. While NGOs have long been understood within the literature and are well established in terms of their purpose and role, FBOs have yet to been so clearly understood. As a result FBOs are described in various ways and there is yet little clarity as both the similarities and distinctiveness of FBOs in contrast to NGOs but also how they are positioned in regards to the wider civil society. This paper has developed a series of typologies that set out various categories of contrasts between NGOs and FBOs that can be found within the literature as well has suggesting an additional typology. Clearly more work is required given the importance of FBOs in both development programming in developing nations but also in advocacy in developed nations.
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