

Calvin's Geneva and her Refugees

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February 12, 2021

One famous Genevan refugee said that Geneva “was the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles. In other places, I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so sincerely reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place.”¹ The refugee who said this rather well-known quote was John Knox, who was later one of the most important reformers in Scotland’s reformation. This is just one example (of many) refugees whose life was impacted in a major way for good through Geneva. And in this paper, I will seek to show how Calvin’s Geneva dealt with a tumult of religious refugees, and the impact this had on the church in Europe. In order to do this, I will look at some aspects of the overall situation in Europe during the time Calvin was in Geneva, as well as focusing on Geneva and her reformation both before and during Calvin’s time there. Additionally, I will look at problems in Geneva as a result of an abundance of refugees going there, as well as some of the lasting impacts from Geneva’s treatment of her refugees.

In order to understand this topic, I believe it is necessary to have some understanding of the situation in Europe, particularly for Protestant believers, in the time of the Reformation. I am specifically concerned with the situation during the Reformer John Calvin’s time in Geneva (during the 1540s to the 1560s). This is a fairly long period of time, and the situation in different states and nations in Europe changed often in the sixteenth century, especially depending on who was in power in each nation-state at the time, and whether they were Catholic, Protestant, or at least sympathetic to Protestant Christians.

¹ Jeannine E. Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare: Deacons and the Bourse Francaise* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1989), 145.

There was much turmoil and upheaval throughout Europe, both political and religious. Germany was split into Lutheran and Catholic sections; England went back and forth under Protestant and Catholic rulers; some of the Swiss Confederate Cantons became protestant – notably Zurich; and in France, though it was never officially illegal, some Protestant Reformers were temporarily tolerated, though it was not to last.²

A French language printing of the Bible was first printed in the late fifteenth century, with the first complete translation of the Bible by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples published in 1530.³ However, printing, possessing, or even reading a Bible in the common tongue could result in cruel punishment or even death.⁴ In fact, at the request of the Roman Catholic church, the king of France even issued a decree completely banning *all* printing of any book in France, under penalty of death, although this was short-lived.⁵ After beginning to take root after the 1520s, the Protestant church in France continued in its growth despite persecution, and was much influenced by Calvin and his writings, especially by the late 1550s, when they even met as a national Reformed and Presbyterian assembly.⁶ However, after a very brief peace between the French Calvinists (known as the Huguenots) and the Roman Catholics, the King of France's mother, Catherine de Medici planned a mass killing of Huguenots, and on August 24, 1572, approximate-

² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume II: A.D. 1500-A.D. 1975* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2007), 765-766.

³ James D. McCabe Jr., *Cross and Crown: Or, the Sufferings and Triumphs of the Heroic Men and Women Who Were Persecuted for the Religion of Jesus Christ* (Cincinnati: National Publishing Co., 1874), 184.

⁴ McCabe, *Cross & Crown*, 189.

⁵ McCabe, *Cross & Crown*, 191. See also David Pottinger, *The French Book Trade in the Ancien Régime, 1500-1791* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 56.

⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 3: Renaissance and Reformation*, Revised (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 315-317.

ly 20,000 Huguenots were massacred – which became known as “the Massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day.”⁷ As a result of the on-and-off persecution of Protestant Christians in France, many French believers fled from their homes during the sixteenth century, including a significant number who ended up spending some time, or even settling permanently, in Reformed Geneva.

In the decade prior to Calvin’s first arrival at Geneva, there had been much political and ecclesiastical upheaval. Geneva had been under the rule of the Duke of Savoy, with the Bishop having much political influence as well – including having the only authority to call a meeting of the citizens of Geneva.⁸ However, due to both internal and external pressures, Geneva was seeking her own independence. When Charles III, Duke of Savoy, entered Geneva in 1525, prominent Genevan citizens, now fugitives, were in the nearby Swiss Confederacy cities of Fribourg (Catholic) and Bern (Protestant), seeking alliances and protections from both.⁹ Shortly after Charles III left, the fugitives returned, along with allies from Fribourg and Bern, carrying an alliance pact with these cities, which was quickly approved by the citizens of Geneva, despite initial attempts by the Bishop to stop them. In the next few years, although the Genevan revolution began as a political revolution, not a religious one, Protestantism slowly began to take hold, especially after 1528, when Bern officially became a Reformed city.¹⁰ There were many attempts by Charles III to retake Geneva, culminating in some success in the winter of 1535-1536, but the

⁷ Needham, *2000 Years*, Vol 3, 319.

⁸ E. William Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), 42.

⁹ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 42.

¹⁰ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 46-47.

Bernese army came and “liberated” Geneva from Savoy, actually intending to make Geneva her subject.¹¹ However, the Genevans protested, claiming, “we have endured war [...] not because we intended to make this city subject to any power, but because we wished that a poor city which had warred and suffered so much should have her liberty.”¹² The Bernese relented, and the Genevan Republic began its’ independence that would last a quarter of a millennium.

Shortly after this, John Calvin, born and educated in France, was first asked to come to Geneva in late 1536 by the Reformer William Farel, who had been ministering in Geneva for a few years.¹³ Calvin had just written his first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, after which he left France under threat of persecution or death. When Calvin spent the night in Geneva while he was on his way to go live in Strasburg, Farel heard that the author of The Institutes was staying in Geneva, he met with him and eventually compelled Calvin to remain in Geneva, insisting that God’s will for Calvin was to preach the Gospel with him in Geneva.¹⁴ However, after only a year and a half of ministry in Geneva, both Calvin and Farel were expelled from Geneva by the city authorities and the Genevan citizens, and Calvin moved to Strausburg, his original destination before his prolonged stay in Geneva.¹⁵ While in Strasburg, he pastored a small French congregation there, and wrote prolifically, but after three years there, he was persuaded by a Genevan delegation to come back to Geneva to assist them in their continuing Ref-

¹¹ Monter, *Calvin's Geneva*, 55.

¹² Monter, *Calvin's Geneva*, 55.

¹³ Needham, *2000 Years, Vol 3*, 187, 197–98.

¹⁴ Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1909), 16-17.

¹⁵ Needham, *2000 Years, Vol 3*, 199.

ormation.¹⁶ However, when Calvin returned, he insisted that the city leaders officially commit to wholesale reformation in Geneva, and to that end, that a commission be appointed to set up laws for the Genevan church government.¹⁷ They agreed, and Calvin and others wrote up the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* to give specific guidelines for the churches in Geneva, including their being led by pastors and lay-elders – a Presbyterian form of church government.¹⁸

For the purposes of this study it is important to note that, in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, Calvin describes the biblical office of deacon as a necessary and permanent office of the church,¹⁹ and, as also mentioned in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, to care for the needy.²⁰ Specifically, Calvin states that “The care of the poor was entrusted to the deacons. However, two kinds are mentioned in the letter to the Romans,” arguing from Romans 12:8 and 1 Timothy 5:9-10 that the first type of deacon were to “distribute the alms” and the second were to “[devote] themselves to the care of the poor.”²¹ Calvin devotes significant time in chapters three through five in book five (“Means of Grace: Holy Catholic Church”) of his *Institutes* dealing with the deaconate, the church’s giving to the poor, and how, in his words, “the ancient form of [church] government was completely overthrown by the papacy.”²² Thus, it is not at all surpris-

¹⁶ Needham, *2000 Years, Vol 3*, 199, 202.

¹⁷ David C. Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 55.

¹⁸ Beza, *Life of John Calvin*, 29.

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume VIII: Modern Christianity. The Swiss Reformation*, Third (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), Section 104 [4.8.7], <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc8/hcc8>.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.9.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.9.

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.5.

ing that care for the poor, and specifically, care for the foreigner or refugee, would be one of the focuses in Geneva during and after Calvin's time there.

It is difficult to find precise numbers for inhabitants of Geneva before and during Calvin's time there, but it is estimated that there were around 10,000 people living in Geneva upon Calvin's return there in 1541.²³ And yet, this relatively small city took in many thousands of refugees, some temporarily passing through, and some long-term or permanent settlers, and while some were wealthy and were able to contribute much to Geneva and its' economy, the majority were poor. Most of these poor were helped by Geneva's General Hospital, but also various Genevan charitable funds, which will be further discussed later in this paper. Unsurprisingly, this influx of refugees into Geneva raised concern in the minds of many Genevans, and resulted in some financial strains in the city.²⁴

To give an idea of the multitude of people coming to Geneva, we will look at some statistics from the time. For example, from the records of the General Hospital, from October 1538-October 1539, more than 10,000 poor strangers were helped (in different ways) who were passing through Geneva – they were given medical care, a meal, a place to sleep, and other things such as clothing and food to take with them on their journey.²⁵ And these were the people who were only passing through, and of those, only those who were poor and needed assistance on their way. Recorded in the *Livre des Habitants*, Geneva's "refugee entry register," there are

²³ William Naphy, "Calvin's Church in Geneva: Constructed or Gathered? Local or Foreign? French or Swiss?," in *Calvin and His Influence, 1509-2009*, ed. Irena Backus and Philip Benedict (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 114.

²⁴ William C. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, ed. Susan Cembalisty (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1983), 209-211. Also Monter, *Calvin's Geneva*, 82.

²⁵ Naphy, "Calvin's Church in Geneva," 114. Also Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 132-133.

records of more than 5,000 refugees coming to Geneva in order to settle there between 1549-1560.²⁶ And of these records, 95% of them are men, some of whom brought a wife and family who were not recorded in the register, which likely means that the number actually well exceeds 5,000.²⁷

One of the problems with the influx of refugees into Geneva was that those in the new independent Geneva were xenophobic, and a prominent group led by Ami Perrin were troubled by the many, mostly French refugees coming to Geneva, fearing that “the refugees and the French pastors were plotting to take their city away from them.”²⁸ There was also a shortage of housing in Geneva, and there was inflation – for which some Genevan citizens blamed these new refugees.²⁹ There are specific examples of some citizens coming before Geneva’s Consistory (the group of all the Genevan pastors along with councilors from the different city councils which met weekly to judge ecclesiastical matters) who were rebuked for insulting foreigners – specifically the French. One said that “there was not one good man among them whatsoever,” and another “May God curse so many Frenchmen.”³⁰

Dealing with the poor and the beggar was an increasing issue throughout Europe, including Geneva, in the sixteenth century, and this resulted in some reform in social welfare in Europe

²⁶ Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 205.

²⁷ Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 206-207.

²⁸ Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 210.

²⁹ Ludi Schulze, *Calvin and "Social Ethics": His Views on Property, Interest and Usury* (Pretoria: Kital, 1985), 72.

³⁰ *Registres Du Consistoire de Genève à l'époque de Calvin*, n.d., 6.206, 218. Cited in Jeffrey R Watt, *The Consistory and Social Discipline in Calvin's Geneva*, *Liberal Arts Faculty Books*, 2020, 23, https://egrove.olemiss.edu/libarts_book/225.

simply out of necessity.³¹ Thus, in this, Geneva was not unique in caring for the poor and needy, but the Reformation (spurred by Humanist philosophy) seems to have led to practical and radical social welfare reform in Geneva.³² However, Geneva *was* unique in the degree they took to reform, in many ways, including in welfare reform. Robert Kingdon, an expert on Geneva during Calvin's time, argued that, in regard to social welfare reform, Geneva was "more thorough, more radical in their break with the past;" and that "it was probably Geneva's uncompromising brand of Protestantism that made this radicalism possible."³³ Calvin certainly had much to do with this radical reform, even of social welfare, but this did not start with Calvin – as several hospitals in Geneva were started even before the Reformation began to take hold in Geneva, with the Reformation leading to their consolidation into one General Hospital, in 1535, a few years before Calvin's arrival.³⁴ These hospitals were not like today's hospitals, though part of their task was caring for the sick – rather, Kingdon calls them "an all purpose institution that provided "hospitality" to all sorts of people who were recognized to possess needs that they could not meet with their own resources."³⁵ In other words, it was an organization simply devoted to caring for the needy in many different areas of life.

But although Calvin was not involved in the founding of the General Hospital, it was, in theory and in practice, a prominent feature in the life of the church. It featured prominently in

³¹ Elsie Anne McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1984), 93-98.

³² McKee, *Calvin on the Diaconate*, 106.

³³ Robert M. Kingdon, "Social Welfare in Calvin's Geneva," *The American Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (1971): 50–69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1869776>, 66.

³⁴ Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 52.

³⁵ Kingdon "Social Welfare," 52.

Geneva's Ecclesiastical Ordinances, with one writer about social concern in Geneva, William Innes, stating:

Evan a casual reader of Geneva's Church constitution, the 1541 Ecclesiastical Ordinances, cannot help noticing the large amount of space Calvin devoted to the city's new hospital.... Calvin outlines the hospital's purpose and operation in great detail. One cannot help but conclude that the hospital was important to Calvin's vision for Reformed Geneva.³⁶

I believe that this makes abundantly clear that Calvin was concerned with the poor and needy in Geneva. However, many scholars have argued that Calvin simply inherited the General Hospital and Genevan systems which were already in place, and he had little or nothing to do with them.³⁷

Robert Kingdon states that:

...[O]ne must conclude... that Calvin was neither indifferent to the needs of the poor nor unwilling to enter politics to advance a cause he valued. He simply selected with care the particular arenas in which he deployed his formidable energies. If he did not work hard to solve Geneva's social problems personally, it was probably because he thought they were already being handled by men of competence whom he trusted.³⁸

Kingdon further argues his point through showing that, through the Registers of the Genevan Council, one can see that the decision-makers in the General Hospital were men who were devoted to Calvin and his leadership and teaching.³⁹ Thus, Calvin could trust that those who were running the General Hospital, and many of the Deacons who dealt with the other so-

³⁶ Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 13.

³⁷ McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate*, 127-128. McKee says that "most scholars imply that the reformers simply went along with a civil poor relief system which they had not inspired and did not control."

³⁸ Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 64.

³⁹ Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 64-65.

cial concerns in Geneva, were performing their ministry well, as he knew many of them personally.

The General Hospital was known to care for the refugee specifically, but it mainly dealt with the needy already in Geneva, as well as those who were simply passing through Geneva – the local poor and the traveler. Additionally, the General Hospital was not prepared to care for the huge flood of refugees into Geneva.⁴⁰ In fact, in 1545, when Geneva in general, and the General Hospital specifically, was overwhelmed by an influx of 1,000 refugees, the city leaders demanded that this group of “newly-arrived refugees to make plans to leave town.”⁴¹ However, only ten days after this decree, a large sum of money arrived from a wealthy refugee, David de Busanton, with instructions for Calvin to see that the money would be used to help the poor in Geneva.⁴² This donation is what some have speculated was the start of a fund specifically for the French refugees, known as the Bourse française, or French fund.⁴³ However, the first official records of the Bourse française do not begin until 1550, so it is hard to pin down exactly when it was started. Regardless, this fund was a way to help to fill the ‘gap’ in the programs of the General Hospital, as helping refugees who desired to stay in Geneva was not generally one of the

⁴⁰ Jeannine E. Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare: Deacons and the Bourse Francaise* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1989), 24. Also, Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 210-214.

⁴¹ Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 210, 214.

⁴² Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 214.

⁴³ Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 169-170. Also John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin, Volume I*, trans. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 463, https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/dqxDAAAAYAAJ?hl.

functions of the hospital.⁴⁴ The fund was run by deacons who were elected to oversee the fund, and they themselves were under the umbrella of Geneva's Company of Pastors.⁴⁵

The contributors to the fund, especially in the early records of the fund, were generally (but not exclusively) French, including many wealthy French refugees who were themselves in Geneva, as well as wealthy French nobles still in France, and even the Queen of Navarre.⁴⁶ However, Calvin himself contributed to the fund, and some believe that he was very likely the most generous single donor to the fund in its' infancy.⁴⁷ Additionally, Calvin may have even founded the fund, and from the records, he was certainly regularly involved, even hosting the Deacons of the Bourse française at his home on one occasion.⁴⁸ Even though the fund started out as a fund for French refugees by French donors, native Genevans eventually started to contribute to the Bourse française as well.⁴⁹ Additionally, the fund broadened in scope in who it would assist – assisting, to name a few examples – native Genevans, a Jew, and many non-French refugees. The Bourse française also proved to be long-lasting, with the deacons continuing to meet to discuss disbursement of funds for 300 years – until 1849, when it was merged with the General Hospital.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 170-179; Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 64.

⁴⁵ Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 70-72.

⁴⁶ Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France: 1555-1563* (Genève: Librairie E. Droz, 1956), 60-61; Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 107-108; Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 64.

⁴⁷ Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 64.

⁴⁸ Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 64; Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 12-13.

⁴⁹ Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 109.

⁵⁰ Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 177, 178.

Geneva's care for her refugees, particularly through the Bourse française and other programs assisting refugees, proved to have a lasting impact throughout Europe, especially in France. In addition to helping the refugees as they stayed in Geneva, the fund also assisted missionary activity, especially missionary activity in France. In Jeannine Olson's most helpful book on the Bourse française, she has a fascinating chapter entitled "International Activities" which deals with this missionary 'arm' of the Bourse française.⁵¹ In this chapter, she shows that some of the funds regularly were disbursed to a wealthy "financial and distributor of books" who was well-known to have sent many booksellers to his native France.⁵² Additionally, many purchases of Bibles, psalters, catechisms, and other books were made by the fund, and there are records of some of them going to France, and a suspicion that many more than recorded went to France.⁵³ Clearly, the Bourse française was not the only Genevan involvement in printing and distributing books internationally, as Geneva had a massive printing industry, and a major international export industry of religious literature, including many prominent refugees involved in that industry!⁵⁴

In addition to books, it is also well-known that Geneva exported people. Refugees came to Geneva, many in fear for their life, with the desire to worship in the protestant manner and live in this well-known oasis of Protestant Christianity. And most of the refugees who came to Geneva did not remain there. Rather, they returned to their home lands and attempted to bring home

⁵¹ Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 50-69.

⁵² Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 51.

⁵³ Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare*, 53-54.

⁵⁴ Monter, *Calvin's Geneva*, 173-182; Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 222-226.

Reformation like they had witnessed in Geneva.⁵⁵ Many were trained in Calvin's Academy, some (like John Knox) pastored in Geneva, and some were explicitly sent out as missionaries, many knowing that they were likely to lose their lives in the process of preaching the gospel.⁵⁶ Clearly, the care that Calvin and many in Geneva had for the refugee extended to the foreigner throughout the world.

There has not been sufficient space in this paper to spend much time on Calvin's theology of care for the stranger, but this theology is very evident in Calvin's *Institutes*, his commentaries, and especially in his sermons. In one of his sermons on Deuteronomy 16, Calvin preached:

God does not want only that each of us rejoice, but that our neighbors share in the joy which is in us. He wills that not only the man may call his wife, and the father his children, but that we may deal those who seem to be far away from us, and that we may so seek to bring them before the face of our God, that the most alien and the ones furthest away from us may be participants of our joy.... [T]hat the stranger, the widow, and the orphans may rejoice with those who present themselves thus to God to make Him an offering.⁵⁷

In another sermon from Deuteronomy, Calvin emphasized that one ought not only to care for the poor, but that there was a particular obligation to care for the poor *who were particularly unprotected*, such as strangers, widows, and orphans. From Deuteronomy 27, Calvin preached:

A stranger is going to be robbed; he is tortured; a very obvious wrong is done to him; but a pretense is made. Why? Everyone wants to be his neighbor's friend, but this fellow is a foreigner, not a fellow-towns-man; he doesn't belong at all! So there you have it: a poor man will be robbed. So too it is with widows and orphans.... Everyone holds back from them – just as if they were robbed. Because, of course, that does happen, God takes such people under His wing and says that if strangers or widows or orphans are deprived of justice, he

⁵⁵ Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin*, 58.

⁵⁶ Monter, *Calvin's Geneva*, 134–35; Kingdon, *Geneva and the Wars*, 127–29; Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin*, 62–64.

⁵⁷Quoted and translated by Elsie McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving*, 55–56.

will avenge it, even though the world does not take that into account. . . . God wished to proclaim by these examples to that if we crush those without credit or the means to look after themselves and in human terms have no means of support, punishment belongs to him.⁵⁸

But not content only to say these things, Calvin practiced what he preached, and he led the Christians in Geneva to do the same, and even those who were not well-off themselves contributed eagerly. André Biéler, who scoured Calvin's works as well as the Genevan Council registers in writing *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, stated that "Calvin himself climbed the spiral stairways of the city's tenements three at a time to collect the charitable donations of the Genevese."⁵⁹ Calvin led Geneva in caring for the poor during his time there, and he also focused on the poor stranger, for whom there ought to be particular concern.

Calvin had a heart for the poor, the needy, the stranger and the refugee, and he wanted to personally be reformed, as well as to have the city of Geneva be reformed in all of life, including in how they cared for the refugee. Does the church today have such a heart? Does your church actively seek to help the poor, the needy, the refugee? In many cases, the church in the West today, and perhaps the reformed church particularly, seems to have lost much of the desire for caring for the needy and the refugee, instead leaving this ministry in the hands of governing authorities and para-church organizations. The church could do well today to study the example of Calvin's Geneva and take application from her care for the refugee. By God's grace much of Calvin's vision for reformation in all of life took place in Geneva, and had a lasting impact, not only in Geneva, and in fact, not only in Europe, but throughout the world. And a significant rea-

⁵⁸ André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, ed. Edward Dommen, trans. James Grieg, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2006), 364.

⁵⁹ Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, 140.

son for the worldwide impact of John Calvin and the Genevan Reformation was her care for the refugee.

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