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Teaching Islam via "In-Built" Syllabi

Engaging Plurality within a Muslim Higher Education Institution in England

1. Introduction

The problem of the prevailing self-alienation of some Muslim *dar al-'ulum*s or seminaries in England derives from their inherited historical encounters with colonialism, especially in South Asia. Over the years, such institutions functioned as a citadel of orthodoxy and preservation of traditions. In the process, the paper argues, they neglected the major responsibilities of connecting with wider society, particularly, with its intellectual and cultural trends. Graduates of such seminaries – *'ulama* – bear responsibility not just towards their own community, but also in relation to the society around them.

The paper suggests that such isolationist tendencies, as referred to above, are also due to the *dar al-'ulum*s' syallabi that rarely allow their students to venture outside their epistemological framework. The premise of this article contends that students who have no experience of engaging with other faiths and belief systems should be exposed through an "in-built" syllabus, which encourages them to meet and learn from others.

An in-built syllabus denotes that the course, or a module of a course, intentionally arranges either visits or builds working relationships with other faiths or no-faith communities by proactively promoting engagement and understanding through dialogue and assignation. This paper highlights two case studies relating to a BA Islamic Studies module and a training course run by a Muslim higher education college in England. The paper argues that such exposure for mature students yields interesting outcomes.

2. Context

The unsuccessful revolt against the British in 1857 in India posed a significant question. The religious class, the *'ulma,* were at the forefront of the revolt and paid a heavy price on an unimagined scale with thousands losing their lives. A whole generation of Muslim clerics and scholars was punished. Some[1] decided

1 Alligarh Muslim University is not the focus of our discussion 'In 1877, Sir Syed founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh and patterned the college after Oxford and Cambridge universities that he had visited on a trip to England. His objective was to build a college in tune with the British education system but without compromising its Islamic values. Sir Syed's son, Syed Mahmood, who was an alumnus of Cambridge prepared a proposal

that what they had lost must be replaced by introducing religious knowledge and spirituality as well as non-cooperation with the colonisers. Their response was to largely shun the world and reject what the colonisers introduced into the sphere of education, cultural and social practices. A new method of teaching based on earlier syllabi, such as *dars-i Nizami*,[2] became the source of preservation and the vanguard for Islamic religiosity. This manifested through the establishment of a *Dar al-'ulum* – an Islamic Seminary – in Deoband in India during 1866. The aim of such education was to preserve the religiosity of Muslims. Education was not the pursuit of "rigorous scholarly knowledge". Graduates were expected to be people of piety as well as spiritual guides in the localities where they lived and worked.[3]

The locals were (and still are) expected to support such graduates and their families and in return they taught and led the community in their religious affairs. This method of working gave prestige to the graduates and they gained considerable influence within their communities. They "controlled the pulpit" and, through their Friday sermons, reached out to the masses. Since the introduction of such systemic teaching and learning, the number of *dar al-'ulum*s has grown significantly in South Asia, as well as, in Europe, Africa and the Americas.

Muslims' migration into Britain not only brought with it their culture, cuisine and language but also their denominational affiliations. One section of people who settled in Britain believed that they were surrounded by a society hostile to their faith and Islamic values. Here, it was considered important to disconnect with the society around them and secular education was discouraged. Such priorities were to bring a generation of young "religious scholars" who had gone through the system of education they inherited from South Asia. They established *dar al-'ulum*s to produce graduates well versed in certain Islamic jurisprudential knowledge, mostly relating to one particular strand of theology, i.e. the Hanafi school of

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for an independent university to the "Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College Fund Committee" upon his return from England in 1872. This proposal was adopted and subsequently modified. Syed Mahmood continued to work along with his father in founding the college.' www.amu.ac.in/amuhistory.jsp accessed on 12th September 2019. Aligarh Muslim University influence on wider Muslim community in Europe has been limited unlike the *dar al-'ulums*.

2 *Dar al-ulum* (lit: a house of knowledge) also called a *madrasa,* is largely associated with the training and promotion of religious scholars in a seminary. The current syllabus in such institutions owes its origins to Mulla Nizamuddin Sahalwi (d. 1748) who prepared it in the declining years of the Mughal Empire in India. The syllabus is called *dars-i nizami* after his name. See also Setting a Subject Benchmark for dar al-'ulums in Britain – A Day Consultation' https://www.mihe.ac.uk

3 Yoginder Sikand quotes Qari Muhammad Tayyib, the grandson of the founder of Dar al-'ulum Deoband, who steered the *dar al'ulum* for over five decades, and remarks: "[…] the aim of the madrasa is different from that of a modern school […] The only way to pass judgment on the madrasas is to see how far they have been able to achieve their own aims, such as inculcating piety, promoting religious knowledge, control over the base self (*tahzib-i nafs*) and service of others. Therefore, no suggestion for reform of the syllabus which goes against these aims is acceptable." Noor et al. (2008, 32).

thought.[4] The first such seminary was established in 1973 in Bury, England, and many more followed. Such seminaries made room for English and Maths classes for the students. However, the priority was religious instruction.

Such influential Hanafi religious groups and their educational centres largely neglected relations with other faith communities. Mosques controlled by them do not engage with their neighbours' beliefs in a meaningful way, as no significance is attached to such interaction; rather, it is considered that such activities could detrimentally impact on their congregations' *iman* (faith). This situation perhaps stems from the fact that they are not adequately taught about other faiths and traditions, although there is increasing realisation that they cannot ignore the teaching of other faiths indefinitely.

Plurality is intrinsic to Islamic tradition. It demands that any religious opinions must carry the weight of culture, customs and their practice by people. It is equally important to recognise that, in order to understand the customs and practices of people, they must incorporate the intellectual and cultural trends of Western society into Muslim seminaries' syllabi. Perhaps, this, in the long run, will create an atmosphere of better understanding and trust.

3. Intra-*dar al-'ulum* Debate

Competing perspectives have highlighted the gap between two different ways of teaching and learning. The *dar al-'ulum* curriculum had its own critics, who clearly considered it not fit for purpose and mounted pressure to change it. They considered that not everything about the secular education system was wrong, and that future religious leadership should have a fair idea of Western methods of education. A further belief contended that, even if you want to confront such a system, you should be aware of what you are challenging. A group of people were united in their belief that the *dars-i nizami* needed revisiting. A leading figure was Shibli Nu'mani (d. 1914). The simmering discontent began to gather momentum around the need to produce '*ulama* who were well versed in the Quran and the *sunnah* [recoded sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad] as well as in modern contemporary thought, who could also feel the "pulse" of the time. As a result, the Association of Religious Scholars (*Nadwa-tul-'Ulma*) was formed in 1893 and the '*ulama* met in the northern Indian city of Kanpur. A consensus emerged in that meeting to establish a *madrasa or dar al-'ulum* based on the above principles. However, internal wrangling delayed the project and it took another five years to establish it. A new curriculum was then agreed, and new methods of teaching were introduced, particularly, the Arabic language and literature. Compared to earlier ways of teaching, this new method seemed livelier and contemporary. Shibli Nu'mani, who was instrumental in inspiring the changes, encouraged students to

4 A major schools of Sunni Isalmic leagal reasoning built upon the teaching of Abu Hanifa (d. 767) It remains the most influential school of thought in South Asia, part of Middle East and Turkey.

spend at least two years (after completing their *madrasa* education) learning and engaging with the modern education system. The *Nadwa* introduced the English language, which Shibli wanted to make compulsory, and after much struggle he succeeded (Nadeem 2014, 142–43). He favoured introducing Hindi and Sanskrit for higher classes as well. However, when training for religious leadership was introduced in Britain, they subscribed to the Deobandi tradition rather than the *Nadwa* one. In addition to the Nadwa going through its own challenges, the leadership came under constant pressure to align the curriculum to the Deobandi one.

4. Islamic Studies in Higher Education

Interest in Islam and the Middle East can be traced back to the reign of Henry II (d. 1189) during the 12th century in England. However, Islam and Muslim society as an academic subject matter in England dates from the establishment of Chairs in Arabic at Cambridge University in 1632 and at Oxford University in 1636. Such academic interest has been sustained ever since. Islamic Studies courses offered by European universities are largely seen by Muslim scholars in South Asia, as well as in other parts of the world, as an undermining force, not only for Islamic Studies, but also for Islam itself. Their significant contributions to the study of Islam and Muslim culture and civilisation have been largely lost, and been ignored until recently by the *'ulama* in Britain.

Increasingly, the fluctuating socio-political changes in Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, provided a new impetus to view Islam and Muslims beyond the lens of philological and Oriental studies. While, for the *dar al-'ulum*s in Britain, such subjects were largely ignored. However, later, when the graduates of the seminaries began to filter through to universities, they looked towards their elders for approval, if not overtly, at least tacitly. The elders had no quarrel if a student decided to take Physics, Chemistry or a Maths subject for his [rarely her] subject in higher education or for research. Obviously, the students' instinct would be to pursue religious or theological subjects, but that choice was received with scepticism. Students they had nurtured over the years, they fear, might lose proper 'track' as well as their spirituality. So, students who pursued a higher education course in Theology or Islamic Studies were cautious and sought backing from their former *dar al-'ulum*s and elders. Such confirmation would allow them to pursue an academic career while maintaining the trust and confidence of the community at a local and national level. Tacit support was provided, but confined to safe subjects, such as Philological Studies, without delving into core Islamic subjects, such as, the Quran, Hadith and Islamic jurisprudence. The elders viewed Islamic Studies with suspicion and saw it as an arm of the authorities' corruption of the faith of the growing Muslim population.

Over the years, it has been reiterated that a non-Muslim cannot teach Islam. However, academics who are not Muslims and teach Islam or Islamic subjects in higher education see "their role as a constructive mentoring of their students".

They believe that their role is not one of advocacy but of demonstration and illustration (Siddiqui 2007, 41–42).

Despite the reservations outlined above some "hesitant" connections with universities have developed, and, as a result, seminaries in England now total more than 30 (Geaves 2015) and are able to produce hundreds of graduates – both male and female – sending them into the community. However, aspirational young people have experienced difficulty and obstruction when their certificates, obtained from *dar al-'ulum*s, have not been recognised by higher education institutions.

Here, it is worth mentioning that the *dar al-'ulum*s have to a certain extent succeeded in achieving their broader aims of teaching and learning through a prescribed syllabus. They have instilled into their students the value of hard work, self-discipline and, above all, *adab* –respect for elders and teachers.

Once a *dar al-'ulum* student graduates and enters higher education, such as, the Markfield Institute (which we will discuss later), he/she is initially bewildered: the teaching methods are no longer anchored in books but on various learning outcomes and objectives; previous forms of examinations no longer seem relevant; emphasis is placed on criticality; and value attached to expressing their own opinions that appears to contest the whole arena of *adab*. However, to their credit, once the initial shock is overcome and an understanding of broader expectations is grasped, they excel in their studies. Over the years, I have observed that they soon reach the top of the class, and ingrained habits of working hard bear fruit.

Secondly, it is important to note that a higher education institution, broadly speaking, provides space where students can confidently air and contest their ideas and thoughts. It offers an arena where teachers and students candidly debate controversial issues, encounter and understand others' perspectives and can make sense of alternative outlooks. Divergent opinion brings out the best in them and, while they taste "freedom", they also learn tolerance and respect intellectual debate and "difference". Those who attended Muslim seminaries value the shared intellectual space they find on campus and, significantly, the questions that they wanted to ask their seminary elders, community leaders or family members are usually raised frankly and openly because of the 'space' provided by higher education.

5. Case of the Markfield Institute of Higher Education (MIHE)

5.1 Undergraduate and Post-graduate Courses

During the late 1990s, the Islamic Foundation decided to establish a pioneering higher education institute, the *Markfield Institute of Higher Education* (MIHE]) that could offer courses relating to Islam. Special attention was paid to devising a curriculum directly relevant to Muslims living in a pluralist society, and "inclusivity" became the byword. Initially, the curriculum was devised as a Master's-level Islamic Studies course that included the unique modules "Islam and Pluralism"

and "Muslims in Britain" as well as modules such as "Sirah–Life of the Prophet". The "Life of the Prophet" module was designed to be studied both from classical Islamic as well as contemporary Western academic perspectives. Overall, MIHE adopted "curricula devised by Muslims but delivered by means of Western critical approaches to learning and teaching". The courses "would be validated by a reputable British university and the degrees awarded by that university." (Commemorative 2010, 4). The institute came into existence in 2000.

In July 2010, a consultation with the Muslim community took place at MIHE. The invitation letter highlighted clearly that *dar al-'ulums* have rendered a valuable service to the community, despite a lack of formal recognition for their qualifications, which has proven an ongoing hurdle to surmount. One suggestion proposed that where particular subjects were not taught in *dar al-'ulum*s, MIHE could provide a wider awareness of the world around them. Against that backdrop modules, such as, "Research Methodology"; "Introduction to Study of Religions" (core modules for all students); "Philosophy and Theology"; "Muslims in Britain"; "Inter-Faith Relations"; "Islam and Modernity"; and 'the " 'Common Word' in Christian-Muslim Understanding", along with areas of media and literature were initiated at undergraduate level. Furthermore, in areas of Islamic Law, current developments and challenges were introduced. One of the significant initiatives presented provided visits to Christian academic and community centres, where learning through discussion and exchange of ideas – albeit very short –certainly made a difference. Such visits made it possible to understand the significance of others' beliefs and faith systems and to appreciate these faiths without denigrating them.

The premise of this article, as mentioned earlier, is that students who have no experience of engaging with other faiths should be exposed through an in-built syllabus which encourages them to meet and learn from others. When the BA (Hons) in Islamic Studies was introduced at MIHE in 2012, one objective was to help reduce this gap and provide an opportunity for Muslim students – male and female – to bridge the two different education systems. In the process, as previously reiterated, some of the modules, such as "The 'Common Word' in Christian-Muslims Understanding", introduced two visits to two different Christian centres during term time. One centre, the Queen's Foundation Birmingham,[5] was predominantly mission and ministry oriented and academically grounded. Muslim students who took the above module met Christian students face to face and engaged in lively conversation on various issues. This lasted for over two hours, including discussion of the two institutions. The Muslim students were then asked to respond to two simple questions: 1) "Name three things that you have learned from this visit"; and 2) "What are your overall experiences of your journey and the discussion?" Some of the views expressed by the students are presented below.

5 The Queen's Foundation "is dedicated to excellence in theological education and personal formation by: Nurturing and equipping Christians in their discipleship; Preparing people for mission and ministry in lay and ordained roles; Resourcing research that serves the mission of God in the world." http://www.queens.ac.uk/about accessed on 30th August 2019.

The students unanimously appreciated this opportunity for engagement and dialogue. One Muslim BA student in their final year of the 2017 cohort remarked: "Dialogue is the antidote to division within society. We don't have to even talk theologically; it could be that we all love the same food." The same student further remarked that both "Christian and Muslims need to concentrate efforts into creating an environment where the other isn't scared to ask." The students found the opportunity to challenge and be challenged by others, and it provided them with a unique experience to treasure for the rest of their lives. Another student commented that the experience of meeting Christian students from the Queen's Foundation "has been a very thought-provoking experience to say the least … the experience has been insightful and engaging and much has been discussed regarding Inter-Faith dialogue but what is evident is that there is much confusion amongst us all!"

The students detailed above were reflective and at times seeking clarity that cannot be found in just one meeting, which is perhaps why the aforementioned student found 'confusion' in such dialogue because they did not have any prior experience of dialogue before engaging with such a gathering.

In many respects, students from the *dar al-'ulums* held negative images of other faiths but by meeting such people, they found that other faith adherents retain strong beliefs like their own and found them to be "lovely people" and had a "wonderful time".

The students also reflected on the vocations of the Queen's students and, when they learned that they were be "ordained" and become "ministers" of parishes, they too examined their own vocation. However, they realised that their "destinies" were not quite so clear. Although they may have taken a serious leap to enroll at MIHE in order to obtain an undergraduate degree, would they be allowed to work in those seminaries from where they graduated? Or would they be considered a "tainted" person who had lost the Islamic seminaries' ethos of "promoting religious knowledge" with piety at the centre? Had the absorption of teaching at MIHE been regarded as so "disruptive" for the young graduates that it may still be deemed disruptive if they decided to go back to their institutions where they had graduated from? All of these questions are real and, in many cases, those students who graduated with a university degree found it extremely difficult to get a job in their previous *dar al-'ulum*s.

Students of the 2018 cohort found a similarity between their experiences and those of the Queen's students, who highlighted the differences within Christian communities as well as further divisions within other denominations. "Within the Anglican community there is a massive variety…" one Muslim student wrote and "one student was even discouraged by many vicars not to go [the] Queen's Foundation". This reminds me of the students who over the years, have narrated how their former Islamic seminaries have discouraged them from attending MIHE's courses. In almost all cases no reasons were provided. The discussions obviously raised a crucial issue relating to a culture of mistrust and fear.

The 2018 cohort also witnessed that their faith had been challenged. Here, was the realisation that they needed to be more aware of the meaning, value and impact of beliefs on one's life and understanding. In a group discussion, one member posed a question about "the compatibility of Trinity and the Oneness of God". This forced the student to think whether this was a question that one should reflect deeply on or whether such a question should even be raised. In the student's words, perhaps this "was not applicable to ask in this interfaith discussion." How his statement could be interpreted is a serious issue, however, should a question of such nature, that requires initial trust building be raised at the very first meeting?

Students of both cohorts at MIHE raised the issue of the context in which they were engaged in dialogue, i.e. the "increasingly secular society". An interesting comment made by one of the students of the 2018 cohort offers an insight into the mindset of a Muslim seminary graduate. This student suggested that "secularisation is trying to destroy beliefs" and that it creates a "set of rules which is TRY, FAIL, ADJUST" [student's emphasis], "whereas religion sets rules to live life by." The discussion took note of the environment of an agnostic and secular society. Another student remarked that the visit to Queen's was interesting due to the way in which the group discussed theology, but, more significantly, it made him aware of how important it is to study philosophy. One student found such discussion refreshing and stated that "it was nice to have a nice discussion […] which did not become a debate."

5.2 The Chaplaincy Course

Another example of an in-built syllabus offered by MIHE is the Certificate Course in Muslim Chaplaincy. This is an innovative short course which commenced in 2003, and runs for eight months each year. Students are expected to spend a substantial time during the period of their course on placement, either in a hospital, within the prison service or further/higher education sector. Other areas that have been included are airport and community chaplaincy. Students are expected to shadow an experienced chaplain(s) within a sector of their choice over a 60-hour placement period. This benefits students through constant interaction with members of other faiths or no-faith communities. They engage with the institutional structures and legal requirements of chaplaincy and the institution that it serves. Students of chaplaincy benefit not only from formal engagement but also from more thorough informal observation and dialogue. In many cases, students, even after the completion of the certificate course, chose to volunteer in such institutions, simply because of the positive experiences they had, while other students attained paid employment within the chaplaincy field.

Muslim chaplaincy has come a long way over the years. It was largely a locally organised affair focusing on meeting the basic religious needs of prison inmates and hospital patients. During the 1980s, it was mainly a voluntary effort, oriented more to what suited the chaplains than what suited the clients. Within the higher

education sector, needs were largely met from within the universities' Islamic societies. A mature and religiously conversant student acted as "chaplain".

MIHE has run this course in conjunction with members of the churches. Its Advisory Board consists of an equal number of Christians and Muslims. The Board approves the course and assessment policies and ultimately acts as the Examination Board. This partnership also actively applies "on the ground". Supervisors at placements are largely Christians and members of other faiths. Hundreds of students have successfully completed the certificate course, possibly 30 per cent of them women. A substantial number of students are also drawn from a *madrassa/ dar al-'ulum* background, including a significant number of female students. The acceptance of the term "chaplain" has helped to facilitate Muslim women applying for the chaplaincy course and ultimately to obtain jobs.

Chaplaincy training has enabled students to engage with the "tension" between their own beliefs and those of others. It is important that they undertake critical reflection and that they have that opportunity during their placements. This changes many preconceived ideas.

Muslim chaplains also create a role for themselves in their own community when they complete the course. They see the potential for the work they do, play an active role and make a niche for themselves in the community. Some of those who have successfully completed the certificate course have chosen a different path. The skills they have gained from the course have been applied in community activities and in local media where they have achieved a high-profile role in public life.

Muslim chaplains in some ways are offering a kind of alternative religious leadership within the community: a leader who has not only studied a particular syllabus, but who has also experienced, through training, a role which is broadly religious but within a government setting. By engaging with other faith communities, Muslim chaplains gain an additional 'qualification' not available in seminary settings. Over the years, those who have studied the certificate course have highlighted what they have learned and how the course has impacted on them.

Feedback was collected after completion of the certificate course and, at times, was given personally. Additional comments were also provided via email. During the very early stages of the chaplaincy course, one of the senior Imams from a Midland city said on the last day of completion of the course:

> I thought that the certificate course would be one of those courses where I would do some of the work, attend some of the classes and at the end get a certificate. I did not realise that it would change my whole outlook on my faith and its requirements, my *Jummah Khutbah* [Friday sermon], and my understanding of society. It was possible because I spent time working with other faith communities as a requirement of the course, in a setting very different from mine. I certainly gained a lot.

The term "chaplaincy" has been a difficult one to accept for some Muslim students. Several alternative suggestions have been received. When asked, "If you do not like the term 'chaplaincy', what term should replace it?" Some said "spiritual

care," others suggested "Muslim advisor", along with other suggestions. However, it was decided that none of these terms could adequately convey the meaning of the role and as chaplaincy is a legal term in this country, this settled the contention. A problem arises if Muslims use a different term but, ultimately, such a term must be understood by others as well.

A female chaplaincy student from the 2018 cohort remarked on her placement experience and working with others:

> When I joined the course, I'd really hoped to find a placement working within the Muslim community. This, however, did not easily open up and, instead, I was warmly welcomed into a Christian team who had not previously had a Muslim on board. I found it a smooth transition working with people of all faiths and none, but it also brought me insight into how important it is for Muslims to be working compassionately in eclectic environments so society can experience the special normality of Islam.

Working with others was much appreciated by both the host chaplaincy team and the student.

Another student of the same cohort remarked that "I learnt a lot from multi-faith groups from different religions, especially those who had more experience, and being able to work with them closely." It is interesting to note that students who go through the placement find themselves working with the chaplains of the faith communities:

> In the absence of a Muslim chaplain during my placement at the University […], I only had access to chaplains of other faith denominations. I however saw this predicament as an advantage as it would enable me to get a better understanding of the generic role of chaplains of other faiths. Muslim Chaplaincy is still in its early period and no doubt we would have so much to learn from the more well-established institutions of chaplaincy of other faiths. I was able to understand better, that aside our faiths, we all are humans with the same feelings and insecurities such as the need for love, understanding, friendship, emotions etc. and by dealing with those of other faiths, based on this understanding of our commonalities, enables to us to connect on a human level to all and perform better as (Muslim) chaplains.

A student of the 2019 cohort suggested that he had learned more about his faith through interaction while he was working with other faith communities during placement. Another student of the same cohort remarked:

> Pastoral care, social interest etc., to understand and identify others needs and to support them considering their individual social, cultural, religious perspectives was a new concept for me and had a lot to learn and reconstruct my mind-set.

The placement within health care service was a great eye opener and helped to acquire a greater insight and understanding of various beliefs and cultural requirements.

Why are 'in-built' syllabi so important? Muslims and other faiths in Britain and Europe are living largely in a society shaped by Christianity. Broadly speaking, society is culturally Christian, although it plays a lesser role in political and economic decision-making. Society is secular and increasingly plural in its outlook. People possess multiple identities. Such factors, demand a response that comprehends the plurality and secularity of society, especially for Muslims operating within an Islamic theological framework; a structure that could provide future religious leadership with recognition of the differences and uniqueness of the faith, fostering courtesy between people and a willingness to work with others in the full knowledge and acceptance that difference remains.

6. Conclusion

This article highlighted the context of the contemporary *dar al-'ulum*s syllabi and its historical origin. It also highlighted that the teaching of Islam is not something new to England and traces its origin back to the 17th century. The two different strands of learning, the article suggests, run parallel, rarely interacting with each other. The article further argues that there is a need for both 'factions' to meet and develop a new method of learning and engaging with others. The focus of such interaction should not be left to the voluntary engagement of students with people of other faiths or of no faith. If a curriculum or module(s) incorporates such methods to meet and work with others, the article suggests that it should provide new ways of engagement that has a long-lasting impact on students and trainees.

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