

Conservative Exorcisms: On William F. Buckley Jr.'s Anti-Liberal Crusade and the Demon of Atheism

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This article investigates to what extent William F. Buckley's lifelong public campaign against atheism is actually motivated by religious values and convictions and to what extent the label 'atheist' has been used within the conservative discourse to stigmatize political opponents as well as opposing voices within the movement. It will be argued that Buckley-style conservatism, in spite of the fact that it rests on a Christian foundation of values, stands in the tradition of what I call the 'hauntological' tradition of atheism which conjures up the specter of atheism as a weapon to be employed in the battlefields of America's culture wars.

When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism.

— Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 1673

In exorcism, a verbal argument can never do anything.

— William S. Burroughs

- I
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- 1 When titans (whether self-declared or not) clash, they often leave a devastated wasteland behind them. It is therefore not surprising that the collision between the two most eminent figureheads of America's post-World War II political Right—[William F. Buckley Jr.](#), “the patron saint of modern American conservatism” (Schultz 2) and [Ayn Rand](#), the nation's arch-libertarian, preacher of a self-tailored philosophy called ‘objectivism’ and self-proclaimed prophet of fundamentalist individualism—eventually resulted in a schism of the movement and what has been described as Rand's excommunication from the major current of US conservatism (see Bogus 213–14). The fall-out between these two celebrity reactionaries certainly had a number of tangible political reasons, but it was also caused by a conflict between an immanent and a transcendental worldview. After Rand's death in 1982, Buckley wrote an obituary for the *National Review*, his “journal of opinion” (Buckley, “Our Mission”) in which he recalled his first encounter with the writer almost three decades earlier—an anecdote that has also appreciatively been retold by his biographers (see Winchell 16; Judis 160; Bogus 204): “Her very first words to me (I do not exaggerate) were: ‘You ahrr too intelligent to believe in Gott.’ The critic Wilfrid Sheed once remarked, when I told him the story, ‘Well, that certainly is an icebreaker.’ It was; and we conversed, and did so for two or three years” (Buckley, *Right Reason* 410). In 1957, the end of this conversation came abruptly, and partly

because of a crucial misunderstanding on Rand's part expressed in her very first words to Buckley: She erroneously assumed that his acumen would (or could) direct him towards religious iconoclasm. But he never broke with the belief system he grew up in and, for his entire lifetime, remained a devout and outspoken Catholic. He repudiated atheism (in general and Rand's in particular) on the basis of his personal religious convictions. However, Buckley did not proclaim Rand anathema himself but through the proxy of Whittaker Chambers, who famously reviewed her thesis novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) for the *National Review*. Chambers's function in this context was less that of a literary critic than that of an ideological censor of conservative orthodoxy in the Buckleyan sense, defined by "a constellation of things: a less-regulated free-market economy, standards of traditional living (including a return to Christian ethics), and a respect for local governance" (Schultz 21). Chambers—and by way of ventriloquism also Buckley—rejected Rand's political and philosophical positions on many grounds, but one of the most divisive sources of discord was her staunch anti-religious convictions, which are also propagated by the novel. In his extensive and vulgarly faux-Nietzschean monologue at the end of the book (which can also be read as a manifesto of Rand's worldviews), John Galt, the messianic protagonist, denounces any form of religious metaphysics: "For centuries, the battle of morality was fought between those who claimed that your life belongs to God and those who claimed that it belongs to your neighbors—between those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of ghosts in heaven and those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of the incompetents of the earth" (*Atlas Shrugged* 1011–12). He construes the idea of a personal god as a basically anti-humanist fiction, "a being whose only definition is that he is beyond man's power to conceive—a definition that invalidates man's consciousness and nullifies his concepts of existence" (1027). Unsurprisingly, Chambers's verdict on these views is harsh:

Like any consistent materialism, this one begins by rejecting God, religion, original sin etc., etc. (This book's aggressive atheism and rather unbuttoned 'higher morality,' which chiefly outrage some readers, are, in fact, secondary ripples, and result inevitably from its underpinning premises). Thus Randian Man, like Marxian Man, is made the center of a godless world. (Chambers)

By basically indicting Rand as a crypto-Marxist, Chambers directed a politically devastating attack against the fiercely anticommunist Rand, especially devastating since it came from the pen of the movement's most illustrious convert from Communism to the political Right, "whose authority with American conservatives," as Buckley remarked, "was as high as that of any man then living" (Buckley, *Right Reason* 410).

- 4 Buckley's biographer Carl T. Bogus partially blames Rand herself for her 'excommunication': "Whether or not Rand thought about it, whether or not she cared when she declared war in these terms on religion—on Christianity, and Catholicism especially—she declared war on William F. Buckley's vision of conservatism. She and her followers should have expected the strongest possible counterattack" (212). On the other hand he argues that the assault on the anti-religious views

expressed in *Atlas Shrugged* had a handy side effect for the Buckley camp in the struggle for the internal hegemony within the conservative movement:

Of course, Buckley's primary interest was not suppressing Rand's total readership; it was suppressing her influence within the conservative movement, especially her views about the illegitimacy of religion, reason trumping authority, and the virtues of pride and selfishness. Despite his boast that Chambers had effectively excommunicated Rand from the movement, Buckley knew that Chambers had only partially succeeded. Rand's works had a profound effect on young people, and she continued to have strong—and from Buckley's perspective troubling—influence on young members of the conservative movement. [...] But Buckley style conservatives clearly had the upper hand. (214)

This inevitably raises the question of the status of atheism in what Bogus calls Buckley-style conservatism: Is it primarily an ideological red line not to be crossed by a conservative? Is the accusation of being an infidel a tactical tool to marginalize undesirable positions within the right wing spectrum and to 'purify the movement'? Or is this indictment, rather, a convenient discursive weapon in the conservative crusade against a different, bigger opponent—liberalism?

II

- 5 Buckley himself gave us part of the answer. In 1970 he edited a volume entitled *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking? American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, which convened the most prominent intellectual voices of the movement (among them Brent Bozell, Max Eastman, Milton Friedman, Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss, and Eric Voegelin) in order to define what the much debated and yet somewhat fuzzy signifier 'conservative' could actually mean. In his introductory essay to the book, Buckley reflects on the relationship between conservatism and (un)belief. His stance on the issue is surprisingly undogmatic and differentiated: "Can you be a conservative and believe in God? Obviously. Can you be a conservative and not believe in God? This is an empirical essay and so the answer is, as obviously, yes. Can you be a conservative and despise God and feel contempt for those who belief in Him? I would say no" (Buckley, "Introduction" xxix). He makes a hierarchical distinction between two brands of atheism: The acceptable one is the "agnostic" or "habitual atheist [...] who knows there is no God, but doesn't much care about those who disagree" (xxx). Its opposite is what Buckley calls the "God-hater," framed as a militant non-believer "who regards those who believe and tolerate religion as afflicted with short-circuited vision" and sees the convictions as "the result of a combination of intellectual defectiveness and psychological immaturity" (xxx). While it is impossible for the "God-hater" to associate with the conservative project, the "acceptable" moderate atheist can even become a tactical ally in the crusade: "The proreligious conservative can therefore welcome the atheist as a full-fledged member of the conservative community even while feeling that at the very bottom the roots do not interlace, so that the sustenance that gives a special bloom to Christian conservatism fails to reach the purely secularist conservatism" (xxx). In other words: if they are anti-liberal enough, non-militant

atheists can become conservatives—albeit of a somewhat inferior category. This halfhearted and somewhat patronizing gesture of acceptance has occasionally been interpreted as an endorsement of some ‘soft’ forms of unbelief by the conservative movement, but personally I would be skeptical here. Certainly, Buckley was able to acknowledge the individual nonbeliever but not his views. He was able to confederate with *-ist* but not the *-ism*. The latter had always remained an adversary, but I want to claim that for Buckley, the question of atheism was not—or at least not exclusively—a question of spiritual metaphysics but of (cultural) politics.

7 I want to argue that Buckley stood in a long and particularly American tradition of using the label of atheism in a calculated way in the context of political and cultural conflicts. I decidedly *do not* want to agree with the accusation, made by Norman Mailer in his notorious public debate with Buckley on the “Role of the Right Wing in America Today,” that American conservatives of the era only “pretend[ed] to be religious” and employed “fraudulent religiosity” to pay mere lip service to their followers (Mailer and Buckley 116). At least in Buckley’s case, religious views were an essential component of his doctrine. But his conservatism was not *primarily* defined by faith as it is the case with the religious (evangelical) Right we can observe in the contemporary United States. As a private citizen, he was a deeply faithful but not a fundamentalist Catholic. He was a believer who had the ability to talk with a certain ironic distance about his creed and his church; he once described himself “neither [as a] theologian nor [a] close observer of Vatican politics” but rather as a “lay Catholic” and “a consumer of Catholicism; or as one shareholder in the enterprise, always with the understanding that the Pope has all the voting stock” (Buckley, *Right Reason* 137, emphasis added). The public Buckley, however, as a journalist, writer, and activist, proved himself to be a “consumer of Catholicism” in a different sense. In his ideological struggles he was always ready to draw on the established mechanisms and tactics of the inquisition (with all the totalitarian attributes associated with it): targeting the opponent (political or otherwise), denouncing him as a ‘heretic’ and forcing him to choose between redemption (submission to the doctrine) or damnation (exclusion from the community; mortal enmity; silencing). While this pattern clearly evokes a clerical tradition of disciplining dissent, the indictment of being an atheist was only one instrument in Buckley’s arsenal—but one he used frequently and effectively. To understand the efficacy of this weapon one has to realize that the narratives of national identity and religion are inextricably interwoven in the United States’ cultural imaginary. Robert Bellah has famously coined the term “American civil religion” to describe this uniquely American mode of identity formation in which “‘God’ has clearly been the central symbol [...] from the beginning and remains so today” (Bellah 37; see also Zappe 75–80). Atheism, as a philosophical position that inevitably calls this central symbol into question, therefore poses a significant threat to this socio-cultural imaginary and lifts the question of belief away from the realm of personal faith to that of cultural belonging to this, as the Pledge of Allegiance frames it, “one nation under God.” This is particularly interesting in the light of the fact that unbelief, both as a philosophic idea or a movement, has played a comparatively marginal role in the cultural and intellectual history of the United States. And yet the specter of atheism remained a haunting—or rather *hauntological* presence in American

culture. Here I draw inspiration from Jacques Derrida who developed the concept of *hauntology*—of course with a different specter in mind—in his book *Specters of Marx* in 1994. Based on a comparative reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Marx and Engels’s *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Derrida reads the specter as a trope or rather a metaphor for a cultural menace that is paradoxically characterized by what one might call *presence in absence*. “[E]verything,” Derrida writes, “begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the *waiting* for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing (‘this thing’) will end up coming” (2). While Derrida’s specter of reference is of course that of communism looming over mid-nineteenth century Europe, I want to argue that it is possible to draw an analogy here and to retrace a similar, equally anxious and intriguing anticipation regarding the specter of the ‘Death of God’ in the history of the American socio-cultural imaginary. Just think about the sheer number of warnings of harmful effects of allegedly atheist ideas, doctrines, individuals, groups, and practices that had been uttered since the era of the early republic in the contexts of various political, social, and cultural conflicts and compare them to the actual number and the range of influence of atheistic or agnostic thought. Polemically, one could say that American culture has (and always has had) an almost neurotic obsession with the specter and has to conjure it up obsessively. Or to frame it differently, American atheism is less actual than *hauntological*. Derrida points out that “‘conjunction’ means [...] ‘conjurement’ (Beschwörung), namely, the magical exorcism that, on the contrary, tends to expulse the evil spirit which would have been called up or convoked (OED: ‘the exorcising of spirits by invocation,’ ‘the exercise of magical or occult influence’)” (58). Throughout history, many of these evocations were *instrumental* in cultural debates of American identity and any accusation of being an unbeliever became an exclusionary stigma. While the case of Rand, who actually was an atheist, certainly involved more than a spectral presence of unbelief, one could nevertheless place Buckley primarily in the hauntological tradition as he frequently conjures the specter of atheism as a weapon in his life-long culture war against a bigger fiend, allegedly more perilous than the nonbeliever: “[T]he liberal, who is the absolute dictator in the United States today” (Buckley, *God and Man* 210).

III

- 12 In his recent book on the complicated personal relationship between Buckley and Mailer, Kevin M. Schultz has shown that in the first two decades after the second World War liberalism—according to Lionel Trilling’s famous statement “not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” (xv) in mid-twentieth century America—had become a political *bête noire* for many intellectuals of Buckley’s generation, and not only on the conservative side of the spectrum: “[T]here was an itch among the young [...], a search for a new way to live beyond the liberal pieties of Eisenhower’s America, or even of Kennedy’s, which had once promised so much but now seemed little more than a better-looking version of the rest” (Schultz 13). A dissatisfied person, feeling alienated from the prosperous and conformist mediocrity of the age, had to choose either the right (as Buckley did) or to the left (as Mailer did) as “[t]he liberals had run things so far, and had created much of the

mess. They were the ones who had a grand purpose for the nation while embracing the dreariness of the bureaucrat and the salesman. This middle road may have made America affluent, but it hadn't made it satisfied" (113). However, the labels "left," "right," and "liberal," although widely used in the cultural and political struggles from the 1950s onward, refer to elusive concepts. Judis points to the fact that while

[m]ost political commentators of the time regarded the fifties as a conservative decade, [...] Buckley and the *National Review* editors identified the acceptance of the New Deal and the willingness to seek accord with the Soviet Union with liberalism. They therefore saw the leading opinion journals as liberal; and they saw the Eisenhower administration, which was maintaining the welfare state intact and which already had negotiated with the Soviet Union at Geneva, as acting in a liberal rather than a conservative manner. Whether Eisenhower himself was a liberal was irrelevant. (135)

For Buckley and his disciples, the results of the United States' liberal politics (according to the aforementioned definition) were disastrous. In the opening statement to the Buckley-Mailer debate, Buckley claimed that the "Lilliputian solipsists of contemporary liberalism" contributed to the emergence of the Cold War, which, in turn, led to the rise of the political Right as its inevitable dialectical "Other": "Cuba is a symbol of American liberalism's failure to meet the challenges of the modern world. If such a thing as Castro Cuba were not possible, such a thing as the American Right Wing, as it exists today, would not be possible; as things are, the American Right Wing is necessary, and providential" (Buckley, "Role of the Right Wing" 165).¹¹

- 14 Ten years after Chambers's damnation of Rand's variant of right wing politics, the Buckley camp even tried to paint her into the liberal corner—once again by using her atheism against her:

In its October 3, 1967, issue, *National Review* launched a second attack on Rand. [...] Inside was a five page story, titled 'The Gospel According to Ayn Rand', written by associate editor M. Stanton Evans. [...] Here Evans tried a new tack: suggesting that Rand had things in common with liberals. Because Rand had no spiritual support for her belief in freedom, she fell back on atheistic humanism. 'This ism in all its major points, the standard left-liberal fare with which we have been regaled for years,' said Evans. Making Rand out as some kind of confused liberal was a clever way of tarnishing her in the eyes of right-wingers. (Bogus 216)

The first time Buckley stepped on the battlefield against liberalism (including everything that could vaguely be defined as leftist) and took the 'A-bomb' out of his discursive arsenal was with the publication of the book that launched him as the conservative movement's figurehead and as "arguably the most productive public intellectual of the twentieth century, publishing fifty-five books and 5,600 newspaper columns and hosting 1,429 episodes of *Firing Line*, in addition to giving hundreds of lectures around the world and publishing hundreds of prefaces, forewords, obituaries, and editorials" (Sheahan 45–46).

- 15 *God and Man at Yale*, which Buckley published in 1951—"diabolically timed to coincide with Yale's [250th] anniversary" (Macdonald 35)—at the young age of 26, just one year after he had graduated from Yale University with a degree in political science, history and economics, was as the historian George H. Nash, himself a participant observer of the conservative movement, pointed out an immediate success:

Within a week the first printing of 5,000 had sold out. In its first six months, the volume sailed through four more printings and sold 25,000 copies—an extraordinary feat for a little-known author writing about a seemingly obscure topic. The volume's sales were fueled by lively publicity in the press. *Time*, *Life* and *Newsweek* ran articles about it. (Nash 137)

- 16 As certainly as *God and Man at Yale*, a *succés de scandal* in many ways, is a book on academia, it is not an academic book. Epigraphically dedicated "For God, For Country and for Yale ... in that order" (Buckley n.p.), it is a tract, an opinion piece, a *Kampfschrift*, a fierce indictment of the status quo at Yale University which Buckley saw as too liberal, too left-leaning and also too anti-religious—a trinity of characteristics that defined his nemesis throughout his lifetime. Quite early in the book, Buckley positions himself by making clear that he does not intend to "make an apology for defining 'religion' in the Christian sense, and eschewing the nebulous, personalized definitions given to that term by so many latter-day psychologists, sociologists, et al. Here and elsewhere [...] I mean by religion a belief in a Supreme Being" (7).^[2] But this short clarification remains the only excursion into the field of (pseudo-)theology. Most of the book consists of provocative and denouncing tirades against the (alleged) personal convictions of various faculty members and the contents of their teaching. He browses through the various departments of Yale to compile a list of professors and teachers he indicts as non-believers. For instance, Buckley reports "a widespread opinion" that what T. M. Green, a professor of the Philosophy of Religion, "teaches is ethics, not religion" (7). Then, he claims to "know of at least one occasion on which Mr. Goodenough [a professor of Judaism] has classified himself, before his students, as '80 percent atheist and 20 percent agnostic'" (8). Ralph E. Turner, a historian, is diagnosed as "emphatically and vigorously atheistic," as "a professional debunker, a dedicated iconoclast who has little mercy either on God, or on those who believe in Him, and little respect for the values that most undergraduates have been brought up to respect" and whose "bigoted atheism" leaves the students exposed to it with doubts "about religion that they may retain for a lifetime" (12). The Sociology department "presents a special problem" for Buckley as it is, according to his judgment, "safe to say that a large majority of its personnel regard religion as nothing more than a cultural 'phenomenon'" (12). His rhetoric is that of a religious essentialist fearing the pollution of his "absolute" spiritual truth through relativism:

[T]here is surely not a department at Yale that is *uncontaminated* with the absolute that there are no absolutes, no intrinsic rights, no ultimate truths. The acceptance of these notions, which emerge in courses in history and economics, in sociology and political science, in psychology and literature, make impossible any intelligible conception of an omnipotent, purposeful, and benign Supreme Being who has laid down immutable laws, endowed his creatures with inalienable rights, and posited unchangeable rules of human conduct. (23; emphasis added)

In addition, Buckley bemoans the widespread irrelevance of faith in the official statements and speeches of high-ranking members of the university administration as well as the invisibility of religion in campus life that proves what he calls “a failure to Christianize Yale” (39)—an institution that, as he points out repeatedly, had once be founded to train ministers and therefore had a religious mission.

- 19 In a rather twisted line of argument, he locates the reason for these developments in “academic freedom” which, to him, is a “hoax” as it allows the faculty members to design their teaching according to their own convictions instead of, as Buckley demands it, catering to the customers’—that is to those who pay the tuition fees—demands. Sheahan points out that Buckley’s ideal of higher education is one of strict ideological segregation:

There would simply be socialist universities and capitalist universities, atheist universities and Christian universities, each with its own orthodoxy and each with its own accompanying speech code and teaching guidelines tailored to support the respective university’s mission. The university’s mission is the propagation of a set of beliefs that it teaches to its students. The specific dogma of an institution is the reason students attend a particular institution and the reason alumni support it. Without that dogma, the university is adrift. (61–62)

It is hardly surprising that Buckley’s depiction of Yale as a seedbed of godlessness has been attacked by liberals who dismissed Buckley’s allegations as largely unjustified. Allow me to quote from the probably most prominent review of *God and Man at Yale* from that camp, written by McGeorge Bundy—who would later serve as a security advisor in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—for the November 1951 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* as an example. Being a Yale graduate himself, his verdict on Buckley’s polemic is clear. Bundy called the book “dishonest in its use of facts, false in its theory, and a discredit to its author,” and he claimed Buckley’s approach was “to take the flimsiest of evidence or no evidence at all, and ignore whatever goes against his thesis. Thus on the basis of a single hearsay quotation—ripped from its context and quite unverified—he condemns as anti-religious a teacher whose profoundly religious influence I myself know from classroom experience and personal friendship” (Bundy).

- 20 That might or might not be true, I myself do unfortunately neither have the expertise nor the resources to assess the personal politics and beliefs of Yale’s faculty of the late 1940s and early 1950s. But for Buckley’s goals the question if these teachers actually were agnostics or outspoken atheists is not of vital importance. Since ‘atheism’ serves as an effective bogeyman in American culture, it sufficed to evoke

its specter to discredit the accused. The method of conjuration is familiar from McCarthyism: compiling lists, presenting them to the public in a sardonic tone that often borders on demagoguery and catering to the guilty-by-suspicion reflexes of the target audience. *God and Man at Yale* is an attack on this particular university but also on the system of (privately funded) higher education in general. But although the argument in the book focused on campus politics, one can say with some justification that Buckley's actual target lay in a higher realm—that of national politics. Yale serves as a metaphor for the nation and the culture war he managed to stir up in the field of academia and is the micro-model for the war he would wage against liberalism as the hegemonic cultural model in post-war America. Buckley sketched out the ideological coordinates in the "Author's Preface" of the book:

I consider this battle of educational theory important and worth time and thought even in the context of a world-situation that seems to render totally irrelevant any fight except the power struggle against Communism. I myself believe that *the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world*. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level. (lxvi, emphasis added)

By equating what he calls "individualism"—an umbrella term that encompasses positions like libertarianism and laissez-faire capitalism, anti-communism, small government, and minimal taxation—with religion and by forthrightly associating collectivism as a socio-economic doctrine with atheism, Buckley elevates the conflict between these two political positions to an almost Manichaeian struggle between two quasi-metaphysical forces. The territory these forces are fighting on and for is America and the proverbial "hearts and minds" of its people.

- 22 When assessing Buckley's position on atheism, one therefore has to speak of a Janus-faced phenomenon. While he based his personal conservative ethics at least in parts on Catholic doctrines and certainly opposed unbelief on *religious* grounds, he, in his role as public intellectual, operated with a *cultural* conception of atheism that is neither spiritual nor denominational. Ayn Rand's factual materialist atheism certainly was contrary to his private views but it served, in the first place, as an instrumental hinge to exclude her hyperlibertarian version of conservatism from the movements it was at odds with, namely Buckley's ideal of a conservative American society. And on a larger political scale, he was unscrupulously willing to *conjure* the demon of atheism in order to *exorcise* another specter that he considered to be a far more perilous nightmare for the USA—that of liberalism which has, according to him, taken possession of the nation since FDR and the New Deal era. Unlike the clearly spiritual currents which by now have won hegemony in the conservative movement—one might think of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority," Marion Gordon Robertson's "Christian Coalition of America," or James Dobson's "Focus on the Family"—Buckley-style conservatism at times coated its messages in soaring religious rhetoric while fighting a rather worldly cultural war.

Notes

[1] How widespread the rejection of liberalism was on both ends of the political spectrum during the era becomes evident in a revealing outburst on Mailer's side during the debate: "I'd like to point out something which is what...not the liberal, because I'm not terribly impressed with the liberal point of view, as you may know. I mean, I don't appear here as a liberal at all, I mean I don't care what you call it: a radical, a rebel, a revolutionary, I don't care what. What I do know is that I'm not a liberal. I may even be some kind of conservative—an existential conservative. God knows what" (Mailer and Buckley 120, emphasis in original).

[2] Macdonald claimed that, in this specific context, Buckley's Catholicism "is irrelevant, since his book defines Christianity in Protestant terms, and his economics are Calvinist rather than Catholic. One of the wryest twists in the whole comedy is that the Catholic press has almost unanimously damned Buckley's economic views" (36).

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