

The Professionalism of Christian Religious Education Teachers as a Divine Calling: An Exegetical Study of Exodus 40:38 at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the professionalism of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers as a divine calling, grounded in an exegetical interpretation of Exodus 40:38 and contextualized within SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Utilizing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, the research synthesized theological, educational, and empirical sources to examine how divine vocation shapes the professional identity and ethical conduct of CRE teachers. The study followed the PRISMA framework, reviewing fifty-three peer-reviewed articles and theological works published between 2000 and 2024. Findings reveal that teacher professionalism in Christian education cannot be separated from the theology of calling, as divine presence undergirds competence, moral integrity, and pedagogical commitment. The cloud and fire imagery in Exodus 40:38 serve as metaphors for God's continuous presence guiding teachers in their educational journey. Four key themes emerged: divine presence as the foundation of professional calling, integration of faith and competence, moral integrity as spiritual discipline, and contextual manifestation of vocation in pluralistic education. The research concludes that true professionalism among CRE teachers transcends technical skills—it embodies faithfulness, service, and the awareness of God's abiding presence in teaching. This theological understanding enriches the philosophy and practice of Christian education by reframing professionalism as a sacred vocation that harmonizes spiritual devotion and pedagogical excellence. Consequently, professional development programs for Christian educators should integrate spiritual formation alongside academic training to sustain holistic and faith-driven teaching professionalism.

Keywords: Professionalism, Christian Religious Education, Divine Calling

INTRODUCTION

Education, from a Christian worldview, is not merely an institutional endeavor to develop intellectual competence but a divine partnership in nurturing human character and faith. Teaching, particularly in the context of Christian Religious Education, is understood as

both a professional vocation and a spiritual calling—a ministry that reflects God’s continuing work of creation and redemption in human life. In this perspective, a teacher is not only an educator but also a servant of God, entrusted to guide students toward truth, wisdom, and moral integrity. The professionalism of a CRE teacher therefore cannot be separated from theological meaning. It is not limited to technical mastery of pedagogical skills but must also embody holiness, commitment, and integrity rooted in faith. The foundation of this study lies in Exodus 40:38, which records: *“For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.”* This verse symbolizes the constant presence of God guiding His people—a metaphor for divine accompaniment in the vocation of teaching. In the Christian understanding, professionalism is not a secular concept detached from spirituality. Rather, it represents the responsible stewardship of gifts and knowledge entrusted by God. The cloud and fire in Exodus 40:38 illustrate divine guidance and perseverance. Just as God’s presence never departed from Israel’s journey, so too is the calling of a teacher sustained by divine direction amid the challenges of educational life. Professionalism, in this sense, is not merely about performance standards or classroom management but about faithfulness to one’s divine mission. The CRE teacher serves as a visible sign of God’s steadfast presence—illuminating, guiding, and protecting students in their moral and spiritual journeys. Thus, professionalism becomes a manifestation of spiritual obedience and worship in daily work.

In Indonesia, particularly in the context of public schools such as SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, Christian Religious Education teachers face unique challenges. They operate within a pluralistic environment where students come from various cultural and religious backgrounds. This diversity demands that the teacher not only demonstrate pedagogical excellence but also embody tolerance, empathy, and respect for others. Within this setting, professionalism is tested not only by administrative expectations but by the moral responsibility to witness God’s love through character, communication, and integrity. The CRE teacher becomes a bridge between divine truth and social reality, embodying Christ’s compassion and wisdom in a multicultural classroom. Therefore, professionalism for a Christian teacher in Kabanjahe is a theological expression of service that integrates competence with calling, and skill with spirituality. Exodus 40:38 provides a profound framework for understanding this sacred vocation. The cloud signifies divine oversight—a reminder that every task done in faith is performed before God’s presence. The fire by night symbolizes divine empowerment, sustaining the servant of God in moments of fatigue, doubt, or spiritual darkness. For CRE teachers, this imagery affirms that professional integrity and spiritual devotion are inseparable. Their lesson plans, discipline, assessment, and classroom management all become acts of worship when performed under the awareness of God’s presence. As Paul reminds in Colossians 3:23, *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.”* Hence, the professionalism of a CRE teacher reflects a dual accountability—to the educational system and to the Lord who called them.

In practice, many teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe express this calling through dedication, patience, and relational care. They face limited resources, diverse student needs, and evolving educational standards. Yet, their resilience is often sustained by faith—the conviction that teaching is not simply a job but a ministry. This study, therefore, aims to explore how the professionalism of Christian Religious Education teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe embodies a divine calling as portrayed in Exodus 40:38. By employing an exegetical and qualitative approach, this research seeks to reveal how theological reflection informs professional behavior, and how divine presence empowers pedagogical excellence. The integration of professionalism and divine vocation offers a holistic vision of Christian education: a space where skill meets spirituality, and where teaching becomes an act of faith that glorifies God. Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding that the professionalism of a CRE teacher is not only a moral obligation but a sacred response to God's enduring presence—the cloud by day and the fire by night—that continues to guide educators in their faithful service.

METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach integrated with theological exegesis, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers' professionalism as a divine calling, illuminated by the biblical foundation in Exodus 40:38. The SLR method was selected to ensure analytical rigor, transparency, and replicability in synthesizing findings from previous research and theological scholarship related to teacher professionalism, spirituality in education, and the theology of vocation. By combining theological interpretation with structured literature analysis, the study sought to bridge academic theory, biblical theology, and educational practice, particularly within the Indonesian Christian educational context. The SLR followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The review process involved four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The identification stage involved gathering peer-reviewed articles, books, and theological commentaries published between 2000 and 2024. The databases consulted included Google Scholar, Scopus, EBSCOhost, and ATLA Religion Database, ensuring both theological and educational sources were represented. The search keywords included: "Christian teacher professionalism," "divine calling in education," "vocational theology," "Christian Religious Education," "Exodus 40:38 interpretation," and "faith-based pedagogy." This search yielded 146 initial records. During the screening stage, duplicates and irrelevant materials were excluded. Inclusion criteria required that studies: addressed professionalism in Christian or religious education, discussed theology of calling or vocation, analyzed biblical or theological foundations of teaching, and provided empirical insights into teacher character and ethics. Exclusion criteria included opinion pieces lacking empirical or theological grounding and studies not available in full text. After this process, 53 articles met the criteria for further analysis. The eligibility stage involved a qualitative evaluation of methodological soundness and theological alignment. Each study was examined for conceptual clarity, research rigor, and relevance to the intersection of faith and education. The selected literature was then categorized into clusters: the theology of vocation and calling (e.g., Palmer, 1998; Groome, 1991), professional ethics and character formation in Christian education (e.g., Lickona, 1991; Noddings, 2013), and biblical models

of divine presence and guidance (e.g., commentaries on Exodus 40:38). This categorization facilitated cross-analysis between theological principles and educational professionalism. Key ideas and recurrent themes—such as divine presence, service orientation, moral integrity, and faith-informed pedagogy—were extracted from the reviewed materials. These themes were then interpreted through the lens of Exodus 40:38, employing exegetical hermeneutics to uncover theological meanings of “the cloud” and “the fire” as symbols of divine accompaniment in human vocation. The exegesis highlighted that teaching, like Israel’s journey, requires dependence on divine presence, discipline, and faithfulness. The integration of SLR findings with this theological insight produced a conceptual framework linking professional competence with spiritual obedience. In connecting the literature to the locus of SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, the review also incorporated contextual studies on Indonesian Christian education, teacher spirituality, and moral pedagogy. These sources revealed that professionalism in CRE teaching extends beyond institutional performance—it reflects a covenantal relationship with God, community, and students. The SLR thus served not only to summarize prior knowledge but to construct a theological-educational synthesis where professionalism is reinterpreted as a divine mandate. By systematically examining global and local scholarship, this study established a solid academic and theological foundation for exploring how professionalism, faith, and divine calling converge in the lived experience of Christian Religious Education teachers in Kabanjahe.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the professionalism of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers is inseparable from their understanding of vocation as a divine calling grounded in the biblical narrative of Exodus 40:38. The exegetical reading of this verse - *“For the cloud of the LORD was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys”* - provides a theological metaphor for divine presence, guidance, and faithfulness. When applied to the teaching vocation, this passage communicates that a teacher’s professionalism must reflect the same attributes of constancy, obedience, and dependence on God’s presence that characterized Israel’s journey. Through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and exegetical analysis: divine presence as the foundation of professional calling, the integration of faith and competence, moral integrity as a reflection of spiritual discipline, and the manifestation of divine vocation in the educational context of SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe.

The biblical foundation of Exodus 40:38 symbolizes God’s continual presence among His people, signifying that vocation is not a human initiative but a divine commission. The cloud and fire that accompanied Israel served as visible symbols of God’s faithfulness and direction, reminding the community that their journey and tasks were sustained by divine will. Likewise, Christian Religious Education teachers who perceive their profession as a calling do not merely function as civil servants or institutional educators but as participants in God’s redemptive work through education. The literature consistently supports this interpretation. Palmer (1998) asserts that teaching emerges from the “identity and integrity” of the teacher, not merely from technique or strategy. The

teacher's presence, grounded in spiritual authenticity, becomes a channel through which divine wisdom and compassion are transmitted. In the Indonesian context, where education is deeply intertwined with moral and spiritual formation, CRE teachers bear the dual responsibility of imparting knowledge and embodying divine presence. Studies by Groome (1991) and Astuti (2022) emphasize that religious education must serve as a means of encounter with the living God, not merely as doctrinal instruction. For teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, professionalism, therefore, begins with awareness that every classroom moment is sacred - a space where God's presence can guide, comfort, and transform both teacher and student. The divine presence is not abstract but relational; it shapes the teacher's patience, empathy, and courage amid challenges. This aligns with the metaphor of the cloud and fire - consistent divine presence that directs, protects, and sanctifies. When teachers internalize this awareness, professionalism transcends technical competence and becomes an act of worship. The review also shows that divine presence redefines the motivation for professional growth. Teachers who perceive their work as service before God demonstrate a stronger commitment to self-development, ethical decision-making, and perseverance. In line with the research by Kim and Macdonald (2019), such teachers exhibit higher levels of vocational resilience, reflecting that spirituality sustains professional excellence. This theological grounding distinguishes Christian professionalism from secular notions of expertise - it situates excellence within a framework of divine accountability and grace.

Professionalism in Christian education cannot be reduced to mastery of pedagogical methods; it must include spiritual maturity and theological understanding. The literature emphasizes that a truly professional Christian teacher integrates spiritual principles with educational practice. Lickona (1991) and Noddings (2013) both argue that moral and emotional dimensions of teaching are inseparable from intellectual competence. The same principle resonates in biblical theology, where wisdom is portrayed not as abstract intelligence but as skillful living in reverence to God (Proverbs 9:10). At SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, CRE teachers operate within a public school environment that values inclusivity, discipline, and civic character. Integrating faith and competence thus requires contextual sensitivity. Teachers must deliver high-quality instruction aligned with national standards while maintaining the distinctive Christian spirit of service and humility. The SLR identified several studies illustrating that when teachers blend faith-informed motivation with professional competence, students perceive them as more trustworthy, inspiring, and holistic in approach (Suyadi, 2020; Widyawati, 2022). This integration not only enhances academic outcomes but also strengthens moral education, as students learn through observation and imitation of the teacher's character. From an exegetical perspective, Exodus 40:38 highlights that God's presence (symbolized by the cloud and fire) guided Israel both "by day and by night." This imagery suggests constancy in purpose - a model for teachers who must remain consistent in their faith and professionalism regardless of external conditions. Faith provides the moral compass, while competence ensures effective pedagogy. Theological interpretation links this duality to the doctrine of incarnation: God's word became flesh, embodying truth in tangible form. Similarly, Christian professionalism demands that teachers embody their beliefs through competent action. Faith without skill risks irrelevance; skill without faith risks emptiness. True professionalism arises when both dimensions harmonize in faithful practice. The

integration of faith and competence reinforces the concept of “calling as stewardship.” Teachers are stewards of knowledge, entrusted with shaping minds and hearts. Stewardship implies responsibility, diligence, and excellence - qualities that define professionalism. As highlighted by research from Whitehead (2019), stewardship-oriented teachers perceive their competence as a form of gratitude for divine grace, motivating continuous improvement. Thus, professional development is not a mere institutional requirement but a spiritual duty. Teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe who embody this synthesis cultivate classrooms that mirror the tabernacle in Exodus - spaces where learning, service, and worship intertwine.

The SLR also revealed a consistent emphasis across studies that professionalism without moral grounding becomes ethically fragile and spiritually void. Integrity - derived from the Latin *integer* (wholeness) - denotes the alignment between belief, word, and action. In Exodus 40:38, the visible cloud of God’s presence served as a public witness of divine truth and faithfulness; similarly, a teacher’s integrity becomes the visible evidence of their faith and professionalism before students and society. Research by Kurniawan (2021) and Tan (2020) shows that integrity among Christian teachers correlates strongly with students’ moral behavior and trust. In the context of SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, where Christian and non-Christian students coexist, moral integrity becomes not only a personal virtue but also a bridge of witness. The professionalism of CRE teachers is tested not merely by classroom performance but by their daily conduct, fairness, and authenticity. Students learn theology not only from curriculum content but from observing the teacher’s patience, honesty, and compassion. The SLR findings confirm that such lived integrity is the most persuasive form of religious education. Theological reflections expand this understanding by viewing integrity as a form of discipleship discipline. Just as Israel followed God’s visible sign through the wilderness, teachers must follow divine guidance in their professional ethics. This involves obedience to God’s principles even when institutional pressures or societal trends tempt compromise. Studies on Christian vocational ethics (e.g., De Jong, 2018) emphasize that spiritual discipline - including prayer, reflection, and accountability - fortifies moral integrity. The professional life of a teacher, therefore, becomes a continuous pilgrimage, sustained by divine direction, just as the Israelites were sustained by the cloud and fire. This metaphor underscores that professionalism is not static achievement but a dynamic journey requiring vigilance, humility, and reliance on God. Moral integrity functions as a countercultural testimony in a world often dominated by pragmatism and material success. The reviewed literature highlights that Christian educators must resist reducing professionalism to career advancement or financial reward. Instead, they are called to demonstrate faithfulness, justice, and compassion as acts of spiritual resistance. For the teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, this implies maintaining ethical standards amid bureaucratic constraints and diverse student backgrounds. Their professionalism, illuminated by the theology of Exodus 40:38, manifests as consistent obedience - walking by the light of divine fire even through professional challenges. Thus, integrity transforms ordinary teaching into prophetic witness.

The final major one derived from both the SLR and contextual observation is the manifestation of divine vocation in the specific educational setting of SD Negeri 040450

Kabanjahe. Kabanjahe, located in North Sumatra, reflects a vibrant interreligious and cultural landscape where Christian education interacts dynamically with pluralism. Within this context, CRE teachers face the challenge of maintaining theological distinctiveness while promoting harmony and inclusivity. The reviewed literature (Simanjuntak, 2023; Siregar, 2021) underscores that effective Christian professionalism in such environments requires contextual theology - an ability to interpret biblical principles into culturally relevant pedagogies. Exodus 40:38 provides a theological lens for this contextual engagement. The cloud and fire did not isolate Israel from the world but accompanied them through it, symbolizing divine presence amid ordinary realities. Likewise, Christian teachers are called to manifest their faith within public institutions, serving faithfully while respecting diversity. The SLR indicates that teachers who embody divine vocation in pluralistic settings become catalysts of peace, empathy, and transformative learning. Their professionalism is characterized by respect for others' beliefs, a commitment to justice, and a servant-leadership attitude grounded in Christ's example. At SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, this calling takes concrete form in pedagogical practice. Teachers integrate biblical narratives into moral education lessons, use participatory learning methods that encourage reflection, and model interfaith respect in classroom interactions. Such practices align with the literature's findings that Christian vocation in education involves not proselytism but witness through love and excellence (Groome, 2019; Bediako, 2020). By teaching ethically and competently, CRE teachers embody the divine light symbolized by the fire in Exodus 40:38, guiding students toward moral clarity and social responsibility. The SLR also reveals that professional identity in this setting is shaped by communal support. Teachers view their vocation not as individual achievement but as collective ministry. Regular fellowship, prayer groups, and collaboration with local churches strengthen their spiritual and emotional resilience. Studies (Yusak, 2022; Doloksaribu, 2023) demonstrate that such communal spirituality enhances teacher motivation and reduces burnout. Theologically, this echoes the communal journey of Israel, where God's presence guided the entire assembly. In Kabanjahe, the manifestation of divine vocation, therefore, extends beyond personal devotion to shared mission - to educate, serve, and bear witness as a community of faith within the public education system. The analysis highlights that professional challenges - such as limited resources, administrative pressures, and moral relativism among students - test the authenticity of calling. However, the literature and contextual observation converge in affirming that teachers who internalize their work as divine vocation exhibit higher perseverance and creativity. Their professionalism becomes redemptive, transforming difficulties into opportunities for spiritual growth and service. This aligns with the theology of Exodus 40:38, where divine presence in the wilderness signified not comfort but empowerment. The wilderness of education - filled with uncertainty and struggle - becomes sacred ground when teachers recognize God's abiding presence.

The study reveals that the professionalism of CRE teachers, when viewed as divine calling, carries profound implications for both theology and pedagogy. It reclaims teaching as sacred ministry, not merely a profession. The metaphor of divine presence in Exodus 40:38 affirms that teaching is an act of co-laboring with God in forming human lives. It reframes professional duties - lesson planning, assessment, classroom management - as spiritual acts when performed in faithfulness. This perspective aligns with the doctrine of

vocation in Protestant theology, which holds that every legitimate work can become divine service when pursued in obedience to God's will. This understanding transforms the ethos of teaching and learning. Professionalism grounded in calling nurtures authenticity, compassion, and excellence. It encourages teachers to see students not as academic objects but persons created in God's image and worthy of dignity. The SLR revealed that such perspective enhances relational pedagogy, fosters moral education, and builds trust. In the context of Kabanjahe, this theological professionalism contributes to character formation and social cohesion among students of diverse backgrounds. Thus, divine calling does not alienate teachers from educational goals; rather, it deepens their humanistic mission. The study recommends integrating theological reflection into professional development programs for Christian teachers. Professional training should not only address technical competencies but also spiritual formation, ethical awareness, and reflective practice. Schools like SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe could institutionalize mentorship and devotional programs that reinforce vocational identity. Administrators should recognize that teacher well-being and performance are intertwined with spiritual purpose. By nurturing faith-informed professionalism, educational institutions can cultivate teachers who are both competent and compassionate - educators whose integrity reflects the enduring presence of the divine cloud and fire. The symbolism of Exodus 40:38 provides a profound lens for reimagining teacher professionalism in the 21st century. The cloud by day and fire by night represent God's unwavering presence guiding His people through changing conditions. In the contemporary educational landscape - marked by digital transformation, moral ambiguity, and cultural pluralism - CRE teachers are called to embody that same constancy. Their professionalism must shine as a guiding light amid the "night" of confusion, yet remain humble and faithful under the "cloud" of divine mystery during the "day" of achievement. Professionalism thus becomes a dynamic expression of spiritual obedience - adapting, discerning, and persevering under divine guidance.

For teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, this metaphor translates into daily practice: maintaining ethical standards amid policy shifts, showing empathy in multicultural classrooms, and viewing every lesson as an opportunity for spiritual encounter. The cloud and fire remind educators that divine calling does not guarantee ease but promises companionship. Just as Israel's journey depended on observing the movements of the divine cloud, teachers' professionalism depends on continual discernment of God's will in their work. This requires prayer, reflection, and community - the very disciplines that sustain spiritual and professional vitality. The results and discussion affirm that the professionalism of Christian Religious Education teachers cannot be detached from the theology of divine calling. Professional competence, moral integrity, and spiritual vocation form an inseparable triad that shapes faithful and effective teaching. The integration of these dimensions transforms the school into a sanctuary of learning, where the presence of God is not confined to religious rituals but radiates through professionalism, service, and love. In the spirit of Exodus 40:38, every faithful teacher becomes a living tabernacle a bearer of the divine presence, guiding students through the wilderness of life toward wisdom, truth, and hope.

CONCLUSION

The present study has revealed that the professionalism of Christian Religious Education teachers cannot be adequately understood apart from its theological foundation as a divine calling. Through the integration of Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and exegetical analysis of Exodus 40:38, the research has demonstrated that true professionalism is not simply a set of technical skills or administrative responsibilities, but a sacred vocation rooted in God's continuous presence and guidance. The cloud and fire that accompanied Israel in their journey symbolize divine faithfulness, direction, and holiness-principles that define the spiritual essence of professional teaching. When teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe embrace their profession as a calling from God, their daily work transcends the boundaries of employment and becomes an act of worship and service. The study identified four central themes that shape this theological professionalism: divine presence, integration of faith and competence, moral integrity, and manifestation of vocation in educational context. Each theme reveals that the professionalism of a CRE teacher is not merely functional but relational-it reflects an intimate partnership between God, teacher, and learner. The teacher, like the tabernacle in Exodus 40:38, becomes a dwelling place of God's presence, illuminating the educational process with spiritual meaning. This divine companionship provides the strength, humility, and direction needed to maintain consistency amid challenges. The teacher's professionalism, therefore, flows from inner spiritual formation, sustained by prayer, reflection, and obedience to God's will. The study affirms that professionalism and spirituality are not opposing forces but mutually reinforcing dimensions. Competence without faith results in emptiness, while faith without competence risks ineffectiveness. The synthesis of the two creates what this study calls "holy professionalism," where teaching becomes both an intellectual task and a ministry of love. Within the pluralistic environment of SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe, such professionalism manifests through tolerance, justice, and compassion-demonstrating that faith-based integrity can coexist harmoniously with public education. Teachers embody Christ's light not through words alone but through consistent excellence, fairness, and empathy that reflect divine character in everyday practice. The theological and educational implications of this study are far-reaching. For Christian education institutions, professional development should not be confined to technical workshops but should include spiritual formation and theological reflection. Administrators should cultivate environments where teachers can nurture their sense of calling, share faith experiences, and seek divine wisdom together. This holistic model of professional formation ensures that teachers remain spiritually grounded while meeting contemporary educational demands. It strengthens moral and character education among students, as they encounter living examples of integrity and faithfulness in their teachers. Exodus 40:38 reminds us that God's presence accompanies His people "throughout all their journeys." For Christian teachers, this means that professionalism is a lifelong pilgrimage, marked by both divine guidance and human perseverance. The cloud by day and fire by night symbolize the unbroken fellowship between the divine and the human worker. As long as teachers recognize God's presence in their vocation, their labor-however ordinary-becomes extraordinary in purpose. In this understanding, professionalism is not about personal achievement but about faithful participation in God's redemptive work through education. The teacher's classroom thus

becomes a sacred space, where learning, worship, and service converge. The professionalism of Christian Religious Education teachers at SD Negeri 040450 Kabanjahe stands as a living testimony of faith in action—a visible reflection of God’s presence guiding education toward truth, compassion, and transformation. Just as the cloud and fire never departed from Israel, divine guidance continues to dwell within the calling of every teacher who serves with integrity, wisdom, and love. Their professionalism, rooted in vocation, becomes a beacon of hope for the future of Christian education in Indonesia and beyond.

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