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Nature or Nurture? What makes people feel confident in faith?

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Author note

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Abstract

Confidence in faith was assessed among 2272 lay people who answered the 2013 *Church Times* survey and who lived in England and worshipped in an Anglican church. The five-item Confidence in Faith Scale (CIFS) included items about the salience of faith, sharing faith, growing in faith and closeness to God. Psychological type preferences predicted confidence in faith, with CIFS scores positively correlated with extraversion, intuition, feeling and judging scores. Tradition and theological stance had slightly less predictive power on CIFS scores, with charismatics, and especially conservative evangelical charismatics having the highest confidence. Over and above these factors, learning also promoted confidence in faith: in particular those who had attended courses about religion in dioceses or through universities showed higher levels of confidence in their faith than those who did not. It seemed that feeling confident in faith is something that some people may be predisposed to, but which also can be enhanced by the right sort of education.

Keywords: confidence, discipleship, education, faith, learning, psychological type

Introduction

The gospel of Luke contains a number of memorable sayings of Jesus, including one about faith the size of a mustard seed: "The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of amustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you." (Luke 17:5-6, NRSV). This might have been of little comfort to the apostles if they felt they had some faith, but not enough, and certainly not the sort of faith that could uproot vegetation on command. The use of 'apostles', rather than 'disciples', in this pericope is perhaps a reminder that it is when disciples are sent out to serve that they can feel most vulnerable and most in need of a bit more faith. It is not unusual for Christians to feel that their faith is inadequate and to want to grow in their faith. Jesus' reply suggests that it is the exercise of faith, rather than the quality of faith that matters (Nolland, 1993), though clearly the two are likely to be linked. Those who feel their faith has salience in their life are likely to feel they are growing in faith and will probably be more confident in expressing and sharing that faith with others.

 Not every Christian feels confident in their faith, but it is sometimes hard to decide why one person feels confident and another does not. It is common experience in ministry to observe that some churchgoers are untroubled by doubts, feel close to God a lot of the time, refer to their faith easily in conversations, and generally project a positive view of their discipleship. Others are unsure about what they believe, rarely feel close to God, do not seem to mention their faith much, and do not have a strong sense of being a disciple of Jesus. Yet others fall somewhere between these extremes, and many people vary in their confidence in faith over time. Sometimes it is clear why someone might be having a particularly difficult time (perhaps a series of crises that leave them doubting in God) or why they might be feel particularly close to God (perhaps after a retreat or a moving worship service). Yet circumstances are not always a sure guide: one person suffering a tragedy may feel cut off from God, while another in similar circumstances will talk of it as a time of particular closeness to God.

Why do people vary in how they feel about their faith? Are people innately more or less likely to express confidence in their faith, or does it depend on their circumstances or experience? Do some faith traditions foster confidence and salience in faith, or is it something that can be developed by experience? Is learning about your faith likely to help your faith grow, or does studying it too intently destroy faith by making it too intellectual? Underlying these sorts of questions is the well-known debate about nature versus nurture: are people simply made differently, so they will tend to express confidence or lack of it whatever their circumstances, or can innate dispositions be overcome by experience and learning?

One way in which empirical theologians have explored these issues is to use the notion of individual differences, a concept borrowed from the psychological sciences. Individual differences refer particularly to the sorts of differences between people that seem to be resistant to change over time: they are innate dispositions that can be modified or resisted, but never fully erased. Personality is the most obvious set of such dispositions, and there is a large and growing literature in the social sciences on the relationship of personality to faith (Francis, 2005; Piedmont, 2005; Saroglou, 2002). Psychological type, a model of personality suggested by Carl Jung (1923) and later developed in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & Myers, 1980), has been widely used to explore the relationship of personality to religion among Anglicans in the UK (Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley, & Slater, 2007; Francis & Robbins, 2012; Francis, Robbins, Williams, & Williams, 2007). Most of these studies have profiled churchgoers to show what sorts of people are more or less likely to belong to churches or to be in church leadership. A few studies have looked at how psychological type relates to particular aspects of belief (Village, 2005, 2013; Village & Francis, 2005) or to attitude toward Christianity generally (Francis, Jones, & Craig, 2004), but to my knowledge there are no studies that have looked at how psychological type relates to confidence in faith among churchgoers.

The psychological type model is based on four dimensions of personality that each comprise two preferences for where and how people handle information or how they interact with the outside world. In each dimension there are two options, both of which people can use, but one of which they tend to prefer to use most of the time. Extraverts prefer to handle information in the outer world by interactions with others. They tend to be energised by interpersonal contact, have a wide circle of friends or acquaintances, and process ideas most easily by ‘thinking out loud’. Introverts prefer to handle ideas by turning inwards. They are energised by solitude, tend to form fewer, deeper friendships, and process ideas most easily by ‘thinking to themselves’.

 Sensing types prefer to perceive information using their senses, and are observers of detailed information relayed by sound, sight, touch, taste and smell. They are also people who prefer the familiarity of routine and repetition, and who are down to earth and practically minded. Intuitive types prefer to perceive information through their imagination, ‘seeing with their mind’s eye’. They tend to link disparate pieces of information, and are excited by the novel, the intriguing, and possibilities that lie ahead.

 Thinking types prefer to make judgements using evidence, principles and logic. They are concerned to apply rulings fairly and are able to be detached and dispassionate when it comes to making tough decisions, even if sometimes they are unaware of the pain that might cause others. Feeling types prefer to make judgements with reference to others, looking for mutual consent and shared values. They are concerned with maintaining group harmony and will be acutely aware of the effects of decisions on those who are in the minority.

 Judging types prefer to project their judging process (thinking or feeling) into their outer world. This makes them more comfortable with order and routine, and they prefer closure and coming to decisions. They value organisational structures that promote this sense of order, which they may see as instruments for getting things done. Perceiving types prefer to project their perceiving process (sensing or intuition) into their outer world. This makes them more comfortable with disorder and novelty, so they prefer open-endedness and may avoid making decisions if they can. They tend not to join organisations, which they may see as overly restrictive and prescriptive.

 Studies over the last decade or more have indicated the kind of people who are likely to be members of the Church of England, and how their psychological profiles differ from those of the population at large. In England, a typical lay Anglican tends to prefer introversion over extraversion, sensing over intuition, feeling over thinking and judging over perceiving (Francis, Robbins, & Craig, 2011). This sort of profile is what we might expect for members of an institutional religion that values the inner spiritual life, is concerned with human values and interpersonal relationships, and in which members value a sense of belonging to an ordered and regulated church. If this is the case, we might expect that people whose psychological profiles most closely fitted the norm would be more likely to feel confident and comfortable in their faith. On the other hand, there may be reasons why certain preferences would be likely to promote a sense of confidence. For example, there are a number of studies that suggest happiness in general is associated with extraversion rather than introversion (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Lü, Wang, Liu, & Zhang, 2014), so extraverts may feel more confident about faith generally, whatever congregation they belong to. Intuitives tend to value change and possibilities of change more than do sensing types, so they may tend to have an upbeat, forward-looking view of their faith development, whatever their particular circumstances.

Most studies that have looked at psychology alongside other predictors of religious beliefs or attitudes have found that it can explain some, but by no means all, of the variation between individuals. Other factors are also important, and sometimes more important. For example, in a study of biblical literalism among Anglican clergy, those who preferred sensing over intuition were more literal in their interpretation of the Bible, but the difference was much smaller than the differences between men and women, between evangelicals and others, or between those with or without a university degree (Village, 2012a). In exploring why something like confidence in faith varies from one person to the next, it is useful to be able simultaneously to include measures that might relate to innate dispositions (such as psychological type) and things that relate to their context or experience (such as education). One advantage of using quantitative studies to explore this sort of question is that it allows some assessment of the relative importance of these different factors. In this case we can ask how much of the variation we observe in people's confidence in faith can be explained by differences in 'nature' (age, sex, psychological type) and how much can be explained by 'nurture' (educational experience or faith tradition).

 This study is based on a wide-ranging survey of *Church Times* readers, the main newspaper of the Church of England. Although this is not a random sample of Church of England attendees, it does represent a cross section of committed lay people, mostly from Anglo-catholic or broad-church congregations. The questionnaire included a number of items in a section headed 'Growth and Learning', as well as questions related to personal factors (age, sex, location), psychological type (preference scores in each of the four dimensions), faith tradition (church tradition, conservatism and charismaticism), and education (general and specifically related to theology or religion). The aim was to assess the relative importance of these different factors for predicting the level of confidence that someone reported in their faith.

Method

In 2013, a four-page questionnaire was published in two editions of the *Church Times,* one in July and one in October. The newspaper is published in hard copy and online, and the questionnaire appeared in both formats. It was based on the 2001 *Church Times* survey, which was designed to assess a wide range beliefs, attitudes and practices (Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005). The 2013 version had many of the same items, but also some new ones, including a measure of psychological type.

The *Church Times* is the main newspaper of the Church of England, with a circulation of around 25,000. It is widely read by a cross section of the Church of England laity and clergy who tend to be mainly, but not exclusively, broad church or Anglo-catholic. Evangelicals are probably under-represented in the readership, partly because the alternative weekly, *The Church of England Newspaper,* is aimed at this constituency. Despite this, *Church Times*  readers come from across the Church of England, and survey respondents in 2001 ranged from extremely Anglo-catholic to extremely evangelical (Village, 2012b). The *Church Times* readers who responded to current survey were likely to represent a sample of committed Anglicans spanning most of the traditions of the Church of England, with some over-sampling of those who are more Anglo-catholic or broad church.

*Participants*

The total response was 4,909, of which 54% completed the survey online and 46% completed the hardcopy version. This study is based on the results from 2272 lay people who lived in England, worshipped in an Anglican Church and who gave sufficiently complete answers to be used in this analysis.

*Instruments*

*Confidence in Faith* was assessed using five statements related to growing in faith, sharing faith, the salience of faith, and closeness to God (Table 1). Each item had a five-point response scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Items were scored such that a high score indicated a positive attitude toward faith, and summed to generate the Confidence in Faith Scale (CIFS).

*Psychological type* was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (FPTS: Francis, 2005). This is a 40-item instrument comprising four sets of ten forced-choice items related to each of the four components of psychological type: orientation (extraversion or introversion), perceiving process (sensing or intuition), judging process (thinking or feeling), and attitude toward the outer world (judging or perceiving). Scores on each scale were complementary, so a high extraversion score implied a low introversion score and vice versa. Scores for extraversion (E), intuition (N), feeling (F), and judging (J) were used as predictor variables.

*Church tradition* was assessed using a seven-point bipolar scale where one end was labelled ‘catholic’ and the other ‘evangelical’. The scores were coded using Randall’s (2005) classification whereby 1 and 2 are classed as Anglo-catholic, 3, 4 and 5 as broad church, and 6 and 7 as evangelical.

*Theological stance*was assessed by a second seven-point bipolar scale where one end was labelled ‘liberal’ and the other ‘conservative’. The scores were coded so that 1 and 2 were classed as liberal, 3, 4 and 5 as ‘middle’, and 6 and 7 as conservative.

*Charismaticism* was assessed by a third seven-point bipolar scale where one end was labelled ‘charismatic’ and the other ‘not charismatic’. In this case anyone ticking the two extreme points nearest the charismatic end was classed as ‘charismatic’.

*Education level* was measured using a single forced-choice item with responses categorised as ‘no formal qualifications’ (=1), ‘school level to 16’ (= 2), ‘school level to 18’ (= 3), ‘university undergraduate’ ( = 4), and ‘postgraduate’ (=5).

*Courses* was a multiple-choice question that asked ‘have you taken any of the following courses in religion in the past five years?’. Responses were: ‘Alpha’, ‘Emmaus’, ‘other parish course’, ‘diocesan/regional course’, ‘further education course’, and ‘higher education course’.

 In addition, respondents were asked for their sex (1 = male and 2 = female), age (five-point scale with 1 = <40, 2 = 40s, 3 = 50s, 4 = 60s, and 5 = 70+). A question asking ‘Which of these best describes the area in which you live?’ could be answered ‘rural’, ‘urban’ or ‘suburban’.

*Analysis*

The aim of the analysis was to test whether different kinds of predictor variables exerted independent effects on CIFS scores. Predictors of confidence were grouped into ‘personal and contextual’ (sex, age, location), ‘psychological’ (extraversion, intuition, feeling and judging), ‘religious and theological’ (evangelical, Anglo-catholic, charismatic, liberal, and conservative) and ‘educational’ (education level and the six different kinds of religion courses that may have been taken). Hierarchical multiple regression allows the effects of each variable to be measured independently of all the others. Adding variables in groups enables estimation of the relative importance of the group for explaining variations in the CIFS scores, using the change in *R-*squared values. *R*-squared indicated what proportion of the variation in CIFS scores across the sample was due to the particular predictors added to the model at that stage of the analysis.

 In regression analysis, categorical variables can be used by being coded as one or zero (for example, someone who had taken an Alpha course would be scored 1 and someone who had not scored 0). Where there are more than two categories, ‘dummy variables’ are created for each category (for example a person’s location is described by three dummy variables ‘rural’, ‘urban’ and ‘suburban’). When testing the effect of that variable, one dummy variable is left out of the analysis because it is redundant. For example, if the rural and urban dummy variables are included, the suburban variable is omitted from the regression. The rural variable tests if people living in rural areas are different from the rest of the sample; the urban variable tests if people living in urban areas are different from the rest of the sample.

Results

Most people responded positively to the items in the CIFS, with around 70% agreeing that they were growing in faith or felt confident to share their faith (Table 1). Over 90% agreed that their faith influenced important decisions in their lives or their attitudes to other people. Only 14% indicated that they felt less close to God than they used to. The measure of the reliability of the scale, Cronbach’s alpha was .71, indicated a reasonable reliability, implying that the item scores could be combined to give a measure of an underlying positive attitude toward faith, the CIFS score.

 The profile of the sample reflected the nature of *Church Times* readers, which is probably similar to, but not entirely the same as, Church of England members (Table 2). The sex ratio was almost equal, which is different from the greater preponderance of women at most worship services (usually around two thirds). The participants were mostly elderly (74% were 60 or older) and just over a third came from rural areas. In terms of church tradition, there were few evangelicals (13%), more Anglo-catholics (40%), and the largest group (47%) would be classed as ‘broad church’ or ‘middle of the road’ Anglicans. Few were charismatic (6%) and liberals (40%) greatly outnumbered conservatives (17%).

 The psychological type profile was as expected for lay people in the Anglican Church: there were many more introverts (69%) than extraverts (31%), many more sensing types (68%) than intuitive types (32%) and many more judging types (90%) than perceiving types (10%). Thinking types (51%) and feeling types (49%) were more evenly balanced, though feeling preference was stronger among the women (59%) than among the men (41%), which is typical of most populations. Overall, these seemed to be, in psychological terms, typical of the sorts of people that might be found in most Church of England congregations.

 This was also a well-educated sample, with 55% having undergraduate qualifications and 27% having postgraduate qualifications. Given the age of the sample, this does represent many more people educated at university than in the population at large, but it may not be untypical of committed members of the Church of England. Over half the sample (54%) indicated that they had done some sort of religion course in the last five years. These were mainly in the parish (31%) or the diocese/region (23%). Around one in ten people had done a course at higher education (university) level.

*Multiple regression*

Personal and contextual factors had little predictive power for CIFS scores (Table 3), explaining only around 1% of the variation observed. Women had slightly higher scores than men, on average, but there was no discernible effect of age, nor any difference between those who lived in rural or urban areas. Adding psychological type scores explained much more of the variation in scores (5%), which were significantly higher among extraverts than among introverts, among intuitive types than among sensing types, among feeling types than among thinking types, and among judging types than among perceiving types.

 The religious and theological variable results suggested it was conservative, charismatic evangelicals who would be most likely to indicate confidence in faith, all other things being equal. Charismatics were particularly likely to have higher CIFS scores than those who had little or no influence from the Charismatic Movement. Overall, these sorts of variables accounted for 3% of the variation in CIFS scores. This was about the same amount as for the final group of variables, related to education. Confidence in faith was not related to general education level, but it was to some types of specifically religious courses. Those who had done Emmaus or another parish-based course reported slightly higher CIFS scores on average, and there was a larger effect for those who had done a diocesan /regional) course or a higher education course.

Discussion

Overall, these various factors accounted for 11% of the variation in CIFS scores, which is not very much, but typical for these kinds of studies. Clearly the level of CIFS scores someone reports is due to all sorts of factors (including random errors in completing the survey), so we would not expect to be able to predict someone’s scores very accurately from their sex, psychological type, religious convictions or educational experience. Nonetheless, these factors do seem to be related in a small way to whether or not people in the Church of England feel confident in their faith. Four key findings emerge from the analyses:

First, personal and contextual factors were relatively unimportant. There was a slight trend for women to report higher confidence in faith than men, but age or where people lived seemed irrelevant.

Second, psychological factors were among the best and most consistent predictors of confidence in faith. Extraverts were much less frequent than introverts in this sample, but in general felt more confident in their faith. This was not just because they were more confident in sharing faith (which might be expected for more out-going people), but also in terms of growth in faith and closeness to God. In may be that extraversion tends to make people more positive and happy about life generally, and this also applies to faith. Intuitive types were much less frequent than sensing types in this sample, but they were more likely to feel confident. This may relate to the intuitive nature of generally looking forward and imagining the future: perhaps this creates a positive sense of growth and change that is harder for sensing types to perceive. Feeling types were fairly frequent in this sample, especially among women, and they were more likely than thinking types to report confidence in faith. Given that the CIFS relies heavily on subjective impression rather than external evidence, thinking types (who tend to make judgements using evidence) may be less inclined to make a judgement either way. In terms of attitude toward the outer world, judging types were in the overwhelming majority in this sample, and they were also more likely than perceiving types to report confidence in faith. This might be a case where those who feel most at home in the structures of the Church of England also felt most confident in their faith. Evidence suggests that perceiving types tend to feel less at home in the Church of England (Francis, Clymo, & Robbins, 2014; Francis & Robbins, 2012), perhaps because they find it harder to grow in their faith.

Third, although the sample was mainly made up of Anglo-catholic or broad-church Anglicans, who tended to be non-charismatic liberals, it was the minority group of conservative, evangelical charismatics who seemed most confident in their faith. Perhaps these traditions place stronger emphasis on the salience of faith for life, the continual growth of faith, and sharing faith with others. Tradition had less effect than might be expected after allowing for other factors, and it was mainly charismatics who showed the strongest positive relationship with CIF scores. This would seem to point to the importance of the Charismatic Movement to the health of the Church of England over the last few decades.

Fourth, education had a similar-sized effect on confidence as did tradition. In this area it was specifically religion courses that seemed most likely to promote confidence in faith. The highest CIF scores were among people who had attended diocesan/regional courses or courses at higher education (university) level. This would seem to point to the value of the Church of England encouraging members to attend courses outside their parish, which seem to be helping people to feel more confident in their faith.

Conclusion

The value of the statistical approached used here is that it allows the factors influencing confidence in faith to be assessed independently. We know, for example, that psychological type is related to gender, to church tradition and to the likelihood that someone will have higher education qualifications (Village, 2007, 2013). This study has shown that psychological factors may directly influence confidence in faith, rather than simply indirectly. In some cases it was the minority types that were most likely to have confidence in faith (extraverts and intuitive types), which might reflect the fact that innate dispositions, 'nature', can make people feel confident in faith whatever the situation in their lives. In other cases (notably judging types) it was those in the majority who were most confident, perhaps reflecting the way that some psychological dispositions are linked to feeling at home in an institution like the Church of England. Those who feel most at home may also feel most confident in their faith.

 Notwithstanding other factors, the value of offering churchgoers the chance to study their faith outside their parish context has emerged clearly from this study. Despite the fact that certain psychological types might be more likely to want to study, the experience of learning, 'nurture', seems positively to influence people’s perception of their faith, whatever their psychological predispositions. As is often the case in the 'nature' versus 'nurture' debate, it turns out to be a bit of both.

Table 1 Responses to items in the Confidence In Faith Scale (CIFS)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  | % who answered |
| Cronbach’s alpha = .71 |  | IRC |  | No | Not certain | Yes |
| I am growing in my Christian faith |  | .59 |  | 7 | 22 | 71 |
| I feel confident at explaining my faith to other people |  | .43 |  | 12 | 18 | 70 |
| My Christian faith influences my important decisions in life |  | .56 |  | 1 | 5 | 94 |
| My Christian faith influences my attitude towards other people |  | .55 |  | 2 | 4 | 94 |
| Nowadays I feel less close to God than I used to\* |  | .35 |  | 72 | 14 | 14 |

Note. \* This item was reverse coded. IRC = Item – rest-of-scale correlation coefficient.

Table 2 Profile of the 2272 participants in the sample

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | N | % |
| Personal and contextual | Sex | Male | 1114 | 49 |
| Female | 1158 | 51 |
| Age  | <40 | 158 | 7 |
| 40s | 140 | 6 |
| 50s | 292 | 13 |
| 60s | 655 | 29 |
| 70+ | 1027 | 45 |
| Location | Rural | 826 | 36 |
| Urban | 568 | 25 |
| Suburban | 878 | 39 |
| Psychological | Orientation | Extraversion | 714 | 31 |
| Introversion | 1558 | 69 |
| Perceiving | Sensing | 1549 | 68 |
| Intuition | 723 | 32 |
| Judging | Thinking | 1151 | 51 |
| Feeling | 1121 | 49 |
| Attitude | Judging | 2050 | 90 |
| Perceiving | 222 | 10 |
| Religious and theological | Tradition | Evangelical | 288 | 13 |
| Broad church | 1083 | 47 |
| Anglo-catholic | 901 | 40 |
| Charismaticism | Charismatic | 140 | 6 |
| Not charismatic | 2132 | 94 |
| Theological stance | Liberal | 906 | 40 |
| Middle | 990 | 43 |
| Conservative | 376 | 17 |
| Educational | General | None | 49 | 2 |
| 16 years | 162 | 7 |
| 18 years | 198 | 9 |
| Degree | 1258 | 55 |
| Postgraduate | 605 | 27 |
| Courses in religion | Alpha | 189 | 8 |
| Emmaus | 97 | 4 |
| Other parish course | 694 | 31 |
| Diocesan course | 512 | 23 |
| Further education | 97 | 4 |
| Higher education | 215 | 10 |

Table 3 Multiple regression of the CIFS scores

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Step |
|  |  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Personal and contextual | Sex | .05\*\* |  |  |  |
| Age | -.02 |  |  |  |
| Rural location | -.01 |  |  |  |
| Urban location | -.02 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Psychological | Extraversion |  | .14\*\*\* |  |  |
| Intuition |  | .13\*\*\* |  |  |
| Feeling |  | .10\*\*\* |  |  |
| Judging |  | .12\*\*\* |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Religious and theological | Evangelical |  |  | .05\* |  |
| Anglo-catholic |  |  | -.02 |  |
| Charismatic |  |  | .10\*\*\* |  |
| Liberal |  |  | -.04 |  |
| Conservative |  |  | .05\* |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Educational | General education |  |  |  | .00 |
| Alpha |  |  |  | .01 |
| Emmaus |  |  |  | .04\* |
| Parish course |  |  |  | .04\* |
| Diocesan/regional course |  |  |  | .11\*\*\* |
| FE course |  |  |  | .01 |
| HE course |  |  |  | .12\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Increase in *R2* |  | .01 | .05\*\*\* | .03\*\*\* | .03\*\*\* |
| Total (adjusted) *R2* |  | .01 | .06 | .08 | .11 |

Note. Coefficients are standard Beta weights when all variables were in the model. \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01; \*\*\* *p* < .001.

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